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OWLET, THE ROBBER PRINCE; Or, THE UNKNOWN HIGHWAYMAN.

BY SEPTIMUS R. URBAN.



THE DUEL TO THE DEATH.

OWLET, THE ROBBER PRINCE; OR, The Unknown Highwayman. A TALE OF THE ROAD. BY SEPTIMUS R. URBAN.

CHAPTER I. THE CHAMPION'S GLOVE.

On the 22d of September, in the year 1761, King George the Third of England, then twenty-four years of age, and who, the year previous, had succeeded his grandfather, George the Second, was solemnly crowned in Westminster Abbey, and banqueted in Westminster Hall.

The new monarch was popular.

The old one had been detested; and new hopes and aspirations had arisen in the breasts of all who came into contact with the court, or were in any way connected with those who did, on this, the advent of a new reign.

Besides, youth is always popular. The spring-time of the feelings is a pleasant-looking season; and it was hoped, thought, and believed that a new reign of a more English character was commencing; and that the delicate tree of parliamentary freedom and national tolerance, which had but faintly struck root in British soil, would now grow and flourish apace.

That was one, of the full-hearted, weak-minded mistakes of the British public, which is ever so ready to fling up its cap and shout "Huzza!" if royalty condescends even to look human for a moment.

And so, on this 22d day of September, 1761, the young king was solemnly crowned in Westminster Abbey, and banqueted in the old hall at Westminster, which had covered with its net-work of dingy rafters so many memorable events, in which the great, the little—the noble, the base—the mighty of heart and soul, and the most groveling and vicious—had borne a part, and "strutted their hour upon the stage."

The hall was a blaze of decoration. Banners fluttered their silken folds in the air, heavy with perfumes; gorgeous candelabra were ready to make a new day with their hundreds of wax-lights, so soon as the brief sunlight of the autumn season should pass away; diamonds flashed like little suns in all directions; the rich costumes of the officers of state; the quaint old dresses of officials occupying positions long since obsolete and forgotten, except to the exchequer; the throngs of military officers; the waving of feathers; the entanglements of spurs in hoops—ladies then affected the crinoline, as now; the rustling—positively the rustling—of gold lace and embroidery; the clank and clangor of sword-hilts and sheaths; the subdued hum or conversation from so many fair and noble lips; the light laugh; the banquet, which presented a blaze of gold and jeweled cups; all combined to produce one of these in-door pageants—half-barbarous, half-magnificent—which no other country, at that period, could exhibit but old England.

It was a dim and lustreless day.

At a little past twelve o'clock, the sun, which had shed but a weak and watery radiance upon the ceremonial, finally retired behind one of those masses of slaty-colored clouds which Englishmen have such abundant opportunities of contemplating.

But the royal banquet went forward right merrily, and the programme of the day's proceedings, part by part, was carried out.

The king had recently married Charlotte, daughter of the Duke of Mecklenburg; and this "plain young woman," as Monsieur Clevoille described her, when writing to his court, sat at the right hand of the young king, and "looked stupid and weary."

The great officers of state said their say. There was abundance of lip-service, and courtly smiles, and backing out from the royal presence; and chamberlains grew red in the face with their exertions, and gold sticks, in waiting, and silver sticks, solemn-looking clerks marshal, Rouge, and Croix, and Clarencieux, and all the trickery of courtly inanity and corruption, fretted, and fumed, and were zealous, and affected great courtesy

to each other, while malice and bitterness were in their hearts; and the banquet, like a stage pageant, was performed.

But what means that fanfare of trumpets—that brazen blast that awakens the echoes of the old hall—and, as if it had been a call to battle, lights up many an eye there present with a dormant chivalry?

Again the silver trumpets of the pursuivants rang loudly and cheerily. What a clangor of martial notes! How the air shivers and vibrates to the ringing sounds.

And now there is a commotion at the entrance to the old hall. The crowd in the palace-yard rend the air with loud huzzas. A dense throng of court minions and relations of officials crowds the lower end of the old hall.

Another shout from the mob without. Another ringing peal of silvery music from the heralds' trumpets, which might awaken ancient chivalry from its grave, and

"Whirling like a blazing flame,
Its heavy falchion,"

defy a world in arms.

Then all is still, except the lingering echoes of the wild and martial clangor in the remote corners of the hall, and the rustling flutter of the silken banners that, like a forest of various blossoms, float overhead.

"Gott gracious!" said the queen, "what dat?"

"Eh!" replied George the Third. "Eh! What—what that? Oh! Champion—Dymocke—eh? The glove, you know. Sir Henry Dymocke—champion."

There was heard now the tramp of the iron-shod feet of a horse on the stone flags at the entrance of the hall.

A loud cheer burst from the mob without.

"That's it," said the king. "Champion—Dymocke. Has the gold-cup, though. Perquisite—don't like perquisites. Don't happen often, eh?"

"Gott gracious!" said the queen.

Another much more genteel and courtly shout now arose from within the hall; and a lane was made for Sir Henry Dymocke, the hereditary champion of England, to advance to the upper end of the banquet-room, where he was to defy to mortal combat all and every one of the grade of knighthood, who, by word, act, or deed, should dare to question the right of King George the Third to the crown of England.

The hereditary champion was encased in steel armor from head to heel. A plume of three white feathers, tipped with azure, floated above his helmet. His spurs were of gold; and a scarf of blue and silver tissue crossed his corselet, having heavy bullion tassels dependent from it.

The horse was in half armor. A rich saddle-cloth of crimson velvet trailed upon the floor, and the arms of England were embroidered, in pearls and gold, upon it.

A steel spike projected from the head panoply of the horse; and, as the noble animal stepped up the old hall, there was a fretfulness of manner about its head, and a wild look about its eyes, which showed that it was rather scared by the flash of jewels and the glare of many colors.

The champion was preceded by a couple of heralds, in their gorgeous and stiff tabards. They carried each a silver trumpet.

Clarencieux—king-at-arms, as he was called—followed them, carrying a scroll in his hand.

Then came the knights' banner.

Then the champion.

Two pages followed. One bore his shield, the other his lance.

And so up the centre of that stately hall—tramp, tramp, with its iron-shod feet upon the sounding flag-stones, strode the horse, tossing its head, and snorting with surprise at all it saw around it.

The court ladies waved their handkerchiefs. The courtiers clapped their hands.

The king smiled.

"There—you see—eh? Charlotte, Charlotte—you see—Champion. Kill all the world—eh? Gold cup as a perquisite, though—eh? Don't like that—eh? Blanchard! What, gone! Colonel Blanchard—"

"Your majesty is respectfully and humbly informed," said a gold-stick in waiting, "that Colonel Blanchard, of your Majesty's Guards, is not here."

"Not here, eh? Was here—was here,

though, this minute. Officer on duty—on guard, eh? Sure he was here."

"Your majesty is right."

"Right—right! To be sure."

The gold-stick bowed so low, that nothing could be seen of him but the middle of his back; and then the two heralds, who preceded the champion, paused and placed their trumpets to their lips.

One full-toned, ringing blast from the silver throats of the trumpets put an end to all whispered conversation in the hall; and hardly had the clanging sounds died away, when Clarencieux, king-at-arms, advanced a step, and from the scroll he bore, read a challenge.

A challenge to all knights, of all degrees, to come forward there and then, and dispute the title of the recently-crowned king, or forever hold their peace.

And then the two heralds turned to one side of the hall, and blew a loud challenge on their trumpets; then to the other side, a second challenge; and then toward the door, a third.

And Sir Henry Dymocke took off the glove—the iron-clamped and bound gauntlet—from his right hand, and flung it down on the stone pavement of the hall.

And the trumpets gave one last, loud blaring sound of defiance.

"There, Charlotte," said the king; "you see—eh?—the glove. If anybody had any thing to say—or wanted to fight—eh?—against us, you know. Why, they would have to come and pick up the glove—eh? What? what? what?"

"Gott gracious!" said the queen.

A young girl dashed out from amid the throng of spectators in the hall. She reached the glove in a moment; and lifting it from the floor, she held it above her head, and in a clear, high voice, she cried:

"Long live Harold the Second!"

Another moment, and before a cry could be uttered—before an arm could be raised to stop her—she had turned and plunged among the crowd again, conveying with her the champion's gage of battle—the iron-clamped glove of Sir Henry Dymocke.

CHAPTER II.

THE ROUTE TO TYBURN.

The autumn wind blew keenly and fiercely around the massive stone walls of Newgate, on the Monday morning that succeeded the coronation, of which we have given our readers but a faint glimpse.

From the palace to the prison is a step in the march of events which has been common enough to lose almost the flavor of a novelty; and we may well leave for a time the gorgeous old hall at Westminster, and the solemn abbey, with its thousand glorious and mystic reminiscences of the past, to gaze awhile upon that dreary pile in old London, which, with its granite aspect, seems to frown upon the tide of humanity which, during the busy hours of the day, floats past it.

Standing boldly on the brow of the eastern swell of ground, which, in that direction, bounds the valley of the Fleet, Newgate, square, compact and defiant—cold, rigid, hard, and dense—seems as if it would stem the full ocean of London life that toils up the hill; and, passing the old Church of St. Sepulchre's, seeks the marts of commerce and enterprise that lie yet another half mile beyond.

And who that passes that gloomy prison-house fails to accord to it the attention of an upward glance—so rich it is in recollections of the past—stormed once as it was, like the old Bastille of Paris; but not like it, to fall to rise no more—for Newgate was never the tyrant's dungeon, in which political creeds were converted into social offences—burnt once as it was by a fanatic crowd, who only sought flames as part and parcel of the wild saturnalia they enjoyed; and yet, now calm, cold, and terrible in its compact integrity, with its little eyes of windows thickly stanchioned, and its deeply-indented door-ways far away in the massive walls.

And over the gateway, there hang sculptured fetters—albeit, now, such iron janitors are but little used, if at all. And here and there—between huge blocks of stones, of fabulous thickness—may be seen narrow steps, through which, by many and sinuous way, the outer air—some of the outer light—thin and faint, like the last flicker of a winter's

day—and some echoes of the hoarse murmurs of the every-day life without—may reach a cell.

A cell, in which some weary prisoner is sighing life away.

A cell, to the chill, iron bars of which, perchance, some solitary wretch clings, and rusts with his tears.

A cell, which is a tomb. The tomb of all hope, of all joy, all passion, and in which the very intellect slowly exhales, until the inmate smiles vacantly, and builds armories with the straw that has formed his couch.

Then the soul has achieved its freedom, and the walls of old Newgate have fallen down before the first smile of fatuity, while the tears of despair have seemed but to thicken and harden them.

Oh! what a world of sighs have issued forth through those prison chinks! What tears have in vain tried to soften the cold iron of the barred grating! Will the accurate water-drop drill a hole through adamant? So it is said. Alas! no tears have yet sufficed to melt the granite walls of Newgate.

And what frantic cries—cries that the almost bursting heart could not suppress—cries that it must perforce give utterance to, or burst in the vain struggle to imprison them, have, with a dull and faint sound, only made their way to the world without.

Those cries were like some poor prisoner who seeks escape, and in the process is dashed to-and-fro, until at length, when, perchance, he falls into the outer world, he has lost the semblance of humanity from many concussions and many hurts. They lose their screaming vehemence and their supplicating pathos by alternate blows against those cruel stones, ere they issue forth into the great city, and the cry which in the cell—which at the inner mouth of some one of those sinuous slits would have harrowed up the soul, issues forth an inarticulate murmur, which is lost in the rout of sounds that belong to the outer world.

And all is despair in the prison cell.

A chamber eight feet square. Stone walls—stone ceiling—stone floor—stone everywhere—one of those narrow slits between two of the huge squares of granite that, like some gray snake, let into the wall, winds its way to the open air—a coarse, wooden bench, put together with pegs only, in order that no iron should be at the prisoner's disposal—a wooden pitcher—a half truss of straw—raking of the stable. The Governor of Newgate kept his horse, and the prisoners' clean straw first served the quadruped. What would you? Are not governors men? and may they not peccate a little straw? And besides, the prisoner in that cell, and in similar cells, is about to be hanged, and therefore, what need of clean straw?

And now, O reader—now, O denizens of a land of freedom, on which the sun of liberty sparkles in its God-like beauty, look with us into this cell, which we have faintly limned, for it is there that one whom, if you will, you may call the heroine of our tale, is lying.

In that cell—that cell with the granite walls, roof, and flooring—that hut of stone, in which there lies so precious and fair a kernel, sits—no, crouches with her hands clasped over her face—her face and hands both resting on her knees—her long, fair hair in many a tangled curl and wavy spiral floating to her feet, and with a dancing motion resting on the stone floor—a young girl.

A prison dress of a kind of gray serge is about her: coarse and common as it is, what a wondrous grace it has borrowed from the "image divine" that it incloses.

The dim light in the cell seemed as if it had concentrated itself about the head and hair of the young creature, who, thus apparently abandoned by God and man, was the inmate of that sad abode. Like a nimbus, the few and fading rays of the autumn moon flickered and floated, so to speak, about her head. In folds fantastic, the coarse serge settled on the stone floor, and for all she moved, or for all she spoke, she might have been but a sculptured form, forming part and parcel of the general stony structure that was around her.

Deserted alike by God and man, did we say? Ah, no—no! A thousand times no!

Heaven was about to drag the pure spirit from out the furnace of affliction.

Man was raving in her cause at the Iron gate of Newgate.

Rest yet awhile, gentle, fair, and innocent Alice Home—that is her name—rest awhile

in thy stony cell! Thou art still now. We wish to look into the eyes of this man, who is raving in your cause at the iron gate of Newgate.

A youth—a mere youth—Gerald Alton—slim and tall, but rather delicate than powerful, his eyes suffused and blood-shot with tears and much weeping, his face pale and baggy, his hair in wild disorder—is at the iron gate.

With his open hand, with his clenched hand, with both his hands, he beats at the iron wicket of the porch of Newgate.

"I will see her! I must see her! She is innocent! Alice—Alice! You shall not kill her!—it is murder! murder! murder! Have some mercy! Are you men, and yet have no mercy? Let us be merciful to each other! Alice! Alice! Alice! Let me see her—let me die with her, for her—for her a thousand times! She is innocent—innocent! Help! help! O God! help me, and put some gram of pity in the hearts of these men! Alice! Alice! Alice!"

The hour was early—half-past seven. Not many passengers were abroad.

The business of the day had not fairly commenced. A man on the opposite side of the way was taking down the shutters of a shop.

"Let me see her—oh! let me see her one moment—only one moment!"

Bang! bang! bang! went the delicate, closed hand against the iron wicket. There was blood upon the heads of the old nails that projected massively from the door; but still he beat at it.

"Only for one moment! Ask the governor for me; tell him I will bless him while I live! Alice—it is Alice Home I wish to see! O Heaven! is there no pity—no pity?"

He beat again on the iron wicket.

The blows had a deadening, sickening sound about them. It was at midnight he had commenced them; and his hands were bruised and shaken.

The man opposite put down the shutters he had just lifted from the window, and looked over the way at this frantic youth.

"Well," he said, "most folks hammer to get out of the old stone jug, but this young fellow hammers to get in!"

"Mercy! Oh, have mercy, some of you! I must see her—I tell you all she is innocent! She cannot—must not be killed innocent, you know! It is murder—a judicial murder! Help! Mercy! Alice—Alice—my Alice!"

That was the first time he had said "my Alice," and the word seemed to overpower him; for, with a cry of such despair that it might almost have penetrated to the cell within, he sank down by the gate of the prison; and it was very strange that he assumed the same attitude there—without—in the open cold September air, as that young girl did in her stony cell.

His hands over his face—his bleeding, bruised hands. His face and hands both resting on his knees.

Poor boy!

He was but a boy. How sad to have the heart so riven in early life, ere it has gathered strength of resistance to the rude shocks of mortal existence.

Poor boy!

And very strange it was, too, that at that moment, from out the cold autumnal sky, there came a white flickering ray of light—a watery beam of the glorious sun—and it wandered down the cold stone wall of Newgate, and passed the sculptured pillars over the porch, and past the two little windows on each side, and past the porch and the wicket, until it fell upon the head of the afflicted one. And there it rested.

Was it a promise? Did it speak to the poor heart in the voice of Heaven, and say: "Be comforted. Lo! I am with you!"

Something cold touched his hands. He looked up.

A poor woman selling milk was close to him. She held toward him one of her little tin cans, and with tears starting to her eyes she said, gently:

"Come, come—what be the matter with 'e? Why, 'e be but a child! Drink, lad—drink!"

"No—no!"

What a world of woe was in the tone of his voice as he uttered that word, "No!"

"Well, but if ye don't take something—" The woman paused.

"I shall die," said Gerald. "I mean to die with her—Alice. Alice. What is that?"

"The chimes."

"Chimes—chimes? Oh, good God. Time—time is going and I have not seen her. What time?"

"It be a quarter-past seven."

He sprang to his feet. He rushed to the wicket again; and still more frantically he beat at it with his clenched hands.

"Alice! Alice! Alice! I must—I will see you! You are innocent! I will die with you—for you! Mercy, mercy!"

The wicket was flung open.

"Ah!"

A brutal coarse face appeared at the opening; and there was a significant motion to and fro of the head to which the face belonged for a moment or two, and then the turnkey spoke.

"I tell you what it is, my fine fellow, you will get yourself locked up."

"Yes, yes—with her?"

"No!"

"No?"

"I says no, and I means no! If so be you only go on in this here way, as you have been agoing on, at this here wicket till Mr. Mould comes down, why, you will get nabbed as sartin as my name's Blunt!"

The youth tried to get hold of the huge rough hands of Mr. Blunt.

"Sir, sir—you—Mr. Blunt, you are a good man—you are so kind, and you—you will pity me!"

"Be off."

"But, dear, good sir—Alice you know—poor, dear Alice—" His sobs nearly choked him—"if I could see her. Only for a moment."

"Bah!"

"One moment? You will not let me hold your hand, sir. See I pray to you—I kneel to you!"

"Bah!"

"I never knelt before but to Heaven."

"Bah!"

"Oh! have pity. Tell me—tell me you think she will be spared—saved! Alice, you know—Alice Home. Indeed, dear sir, she is innocent—quite innocent—as some angel, innocent. It is murder!"

"I tell you what—"

"Yes, yes. Bless you!"

"I'm Blunt by name and blunt by nature. Is this here Monday mornin', or isn't it?"

"It is—Monday morning."

How poor Gerald shuddered!

"Then Alice Home is down for Tyburn, I tells you."

"No—no! O God, no!"

"Say I'm a liar at once!"

"Bang went the wicket shut. Gerald held up his hands skyward:

"Oh Heaven, if there be no justice on earth—no pity—no mercy! do Thou of Thy infinite grace and goodness, spare her—spare her!"

Ding-dong—ding-dong. The half-hour past seven.

A curious little throng of persons began to collect about Gerald.

"What is it?" asked one.

"Why, it's a hanging," said another.

"Oh, indeed!"

"Yes, don't you know. There's a young girl to be taken to Tyburn this morning and hung, for stealing a diamond bracelet at Mr. Ambrose's, the jewellers, on Ludgate Hill."

"Oh, indeed! Thank you."

"She will start at eight o'clock."

"Ah! I'm busy—thank you; I must be off."

"Very good, sir."

With his hands clasping his head, Gerald listened to all this, and looked from one speaker to the other, and then he made a wild rush up the steps that lead to the governor's house—as the portion of the prison which is in the occupation of that functionary is called—so knocked loudly and sharply at the door.

"Now," said Mr. Blunt, as he opened his wicket, and leaned out in an easy attitude. "Now he is in for it, I rather don't think. Oh, dear—no!"

The door of the governor's house was opened. A man ran out on to the topmost step, and caught Gerald by the collar.

"I told you so," said Mr. Blunt, the turnkey. "Now he's in for it, I should say, rather. That's Mr. Mould."

The crowd began to thicken, and to take an interest in the affair.

"You young rascal!" cried the man who had collared Gerald, "you have been at this sort of thing all night long."

"Hold! hold!" cried a gentleman, likewise emerging from the governor's house.

This gentleman was in canonicals, and was the reverend ordinary of Newgate.

"But, sir!" said Mould.

"Nay, nay! Let him be—let him be. It is hard to punish the lad for excesses committed in his grief. My good young man, now go home, I pray you. The young person in whom you interest yourself, and for whom you feel so much, has been tried by a jury of her countrymen and found guilty, and she must suffer."

"No—O God! no! Sir, she is innocent." The clergyman shook his head.

"Come, come, now! Go home—go home."

A shout was raised at this moment by some boys, who had collected on the other side of the way.

The sheriff's carriage had appeared in the Old Bailey; from a yard opposite the prison a cart at the same time was driven forth; a posse of mounted constables came then at a trot up the Old Bailey from the direction of Ludgate Hill.

The crowd, in a most magical manner, seemed then to increase from a few dozen persons to a multitude.

With cries and screams, Gerald Alton saw all these changes—all these preparations for the judicial murder of her whom he loved better—oh, far better—than his life; and he stood on the steps of the governor's house, and he shrieked aloud.

It was awful to hear him.

"God bless me!" said the sheriff. "That is very—a—a—very—I may say, disagreeable!"

"Very, sir!" said the clergyman. "It is a young man of the name of Gerald Alton. He is an apprentice at Mr. Ambrose's, where Alice Home committed the theft for which she is to suffer at Tyburn to-day."

"Yes—a—yes. Well, is all ready? O Mr. Mould! there you are—there you are, sir. Time, is it not?"

"Not quite, sir."

With clear pertinacity, and with sharp tones—each one of which seemed to fall upon the heart of Gerald Alton—the clock of St. Sepulchre's struck the three-quarters past eight.

The boys in the crowd now cheered, they did not know what for, and then they yelled and hooted, as a thin, spare man with one eye got up into the cart that had issued from the yard opposite Newgate.

That was the hangman.

Then a sort of frenzy took possession of Gerald Alton; and from the steps of the governor's house he, in a high-pitched voice, of awful intensity, spoke:

"Murder! murder! murder!" he cried. "Murder is about to be done! The young, and the innocent, and the good will suffer, and no one has pity. Help! O men and women of England! mercy, mercy! Save her—save Alice Home, for she is innocent; and were she ten times guilty—had she taken ten diamond bracelets, is it right—can it be right—can it be just and proper, in the face of God—before the light of his day, to kill—to murder her? Help! Oh, save her—save her! So young—so fair—so good—so innocent! She—she is but seventeen years of age; she would not give a moment's pain to the meanest thing that creeps. No father—no mother—no brother—no sister—all alone she is; and now they want to drag her to death. Murder! murder! God, it is murder! Help! Help earth—help human hearts—help Heaven!"

Yells and cries burst from the crowd, as this appeal found its way to their human sympathies; and it was quite evident to the authorities that a very dangerous concourse of people were assembling.

People from Blackfriars—from that region lying nestling by the old Temple, and known as Alsatia in olden times; people from over the water in shoals; people from the nest of lanes and courts, and squallid objects from Smithfield down to Field Lane in the valley of the Fleet.

A dense mass, of ten thousand persons at least, yelled, groaned, hissed, and shouted within view of the grim walls of Newgate.

The mounted police officers ranged themselves around the cart.

The terrified sheriff ran into the governor's house.

A couple of men, who had issued out of Giltspur street, bearing a coffin and tressles which were intended to be placed in the cart, were knocked down and seriously injured, while the coffin itself, in two minutes, was reduced to splinters.

"A riot, I see," said Mr. Mould. "Blakehey."

"Ay, sir!" said a mounted police officer.

"Take that young fellow, Gerald Alton, into custody at once, and bring him in here."

"Yes, sir."

Gerald heard the order, and he made but one leap from the steps of the governor's house into the crowd.

"No, no!" he shouted. "I must see her; God help her! I must see her; save me to see her!"

The roar that burst from the thousands of throats of the mob was something terrific, as it opened and seemed to swallow up the lithe and delicate form of Gerald Alton.

The officer looked aghast.

"I'm afraid, Mr. Mould, I shall not be able to get him."

"Then make haste and be off."

"All right, sir."

"I don't see the coffin."

It was the motion of the officer's lips and his glance toward Giltspur street, that let the foremost of the mob guess what he said, and loud cries arose of:

"The coffin! the coffin! They want the coffin! Hurrah! hurrah! Let them have it!"

Then every one who had a bit of the coffin hung it at the officers, and the cart, and the hangman; and many a sharp stone came likewise with the shower.

Then a yell that transcended anything that had yet been heard arose from the mob, as there emerged from an inn-yard close to Newgate a man on a black horse of great size and strength, and made his way up to the cart.

This was Jonas Brand, a well-known Bow-street runner, as the officers were called, and whose duty it would be to head the procession to Tyburn.

All was ready.

St. Sepulchre's clock struck eight.

At the moment, Alice's cell-door was opened, and the officials of the prison appeared on the threshold.

Then the love of life came strongly on the heart and brain of the young girl, and she clasped her hands and screamed and prayed for mercy.

"No, no! Oh, indeed and in truth, I did not steal the bracelet. I did not take it—I never saw it. I am innocent. Spare my life. I am so young—so helpless."

Then a man walked into the cell—a man with one eye. He laid his hand upon her shoulder.

"Come!"

With a cry, Alice shrank like a wounded bird from his touch.

"Mercy! mercy!"

"Seek it in heaven!" said the clergyman.

Pale and ghastly, with a trace of blood upon her delicate lip, Alice looked about her. She said no more aloud, but bowing her head upon her breast, she shuddered and followed them all from the cell. It was very faintly to herself that she said, in a low, moaning tone:

"I shall soon be with you, mother."

Two minutes, and a wild cry and commotion in the crowd told the apparance of the condemned girl. A strong reinforcement of police officers had been procured, and at five minutes past eight the procession of death started for old Tyburn.

Alice Home was in the cart, and the ordinary of Newgate was with her. The man on the large black horse—Jonas Brand—rode in front. Immediately following him, came the sheriff in his coach. Then about thirty mounted officers in all, surrounded the cart and followed it.

So beautiful, so young—looking, in fact, much younger than she really was—poor Alice was at once the grief and the commiseration of all beholders. The mob poured out of the Old Bailey, and down Snow Hill toward Holborn Bridge, like a torrent.

The cart could only get on at a foot-pace.

Then Jonas Brand motioned some of his men to get out of his way, and he rode close to the cart.

"Reverend sir," he said, to the ordinary, "will you allow me to speak to the prisoner for a moment?"

"Nay, not now! not now!"

"It is in the interests of justice. Only a word or two."

"Poor girl! you ought to let her be. She still denies her guilt."

"One moment, reverend sir."

"Well, well."

"Alice Home," said Jonas Brand, as he bent over the side of the cart, "listen to me." Alice shuddered.

"I really think you would have been let off, if you would have told where that valise was to be found."

"No, no—"

"Yes—and even now—"

"No! I promised my mother, at her last moments, that until I was twenty-one years of age I would never betray the place of its concealment."

"What is in it?"

"I know not."

"Girl, what if even now I would promise you life?"

"Life! life! O God! help me!"

"Yes, life, if you would say where that small leathern valise is to be found."

"I am innocent."

"That is nothing—you are condemned. Come, now, will you purchase your life?"

"I will! I will! O God! it is hard to die. Mother, you will forgive me! you did not think of this."

"To be sure not."

"I promise, then, that if I am reprieved to-day, I will tell you where the valise is, to-morrow."

"No; say where it is now, and you shall be saved."

The cavalcade had at this moment reached the foot of Snow Hill, and the mob had been joined by a powerful reinforcement from Fleet Market, and the neighborhood on the northern side of what is now Farringdon street.

Notwithstanding all the threats and imprecations of the constables, it was impossible, for a few seconds, to proceed; and during those few seconds, the mob brought Gerald Alton to the front, amid repeated cheers.

Hoisted from shoulder to shoulder, and almost literally walking over the heads of the people, Gerald Alton was brought sufficiently near to the fatal cart to make himself heard; and he cried out, in tones of agony:

"Alice! Alice! dear Alice!"

She heard the cry, and she turned and saw Gerald there, held aloft by the crowd; and she strove to reach him by stretching forth her arms, as she answered his cry:

"Gerald—dear Gerald!"

"Speak, girl! I promise you life and love with that boy you think so much of, if you will tell me where is the valise?"

"On your word—on your oath?"

"I swear it!"

"In the dry well at Corfe."

"Where?"

"Corfe Castle, in Dorsetshire."

"Good! Drive on, there! Charge the crowd, and use your hangers, my men, if they will not let you pass! Charge!"

Alice uttered a cry of despair, and sunk back in the cart: she felt that she was betrayed!

CHAPTER III.

THE OLD PALACE AT KEW.

On that same morning, when Alice Home, whom we must leave for a short space at Holborn Bridge, was brought out of Newgate to die, his most gracious majesty, King George the Third, took an early walk in the private gardens of the old red brick palace of Kew.

His majesty wore what was then and is now called the Windsor uniform, which consists of a costume that might make its wearer be mistaken for a postman, a liveried servant, or some eccentrically-dressed resident of an almshouse, or other charitable institution, in which a particular costume for the recipients of his bounty had been laid down by the founder.

A couple of lords in waiting had been aroused at what they considered the unchristian-like hour of five in the morning, and were sauntering along after his majesty, at a distance of about fifty paces.

The morning was decidedly raw, decidedly gusty, and gave indications of rain.

His majesty looked rather red in the face, as he encountered the south-eastern wind, and there was about his royal eyes that very wide-open look that characterized the sort of intellect behind them, which appeared ever on the stretch to catch some meaning, or to eliminate some idea which baffled it.

Then King George the Third had a habit of conversing with himself, which, since it by no means fatigued the understanding, answered very well, as in the words of the poet:

"None but himself could be his parallel."

But, at the end of a shady walk, which was terminated by some variegated laurels of great size and beauty, his majesty paused, abruptly.

"Very odd! very, very odd! Where can he go? Where is he? where—where—where, eh?"

After this speech, or succession of interjectional sounds, the king turned and retraced his steps, saying:

"Ah! to be sure—that's it—where does he go? Eh, eh, eh? where does he go?"

The royal eyes now opened wider than ever, and the two lords in waiting, fancying that something was wanted of them, advanced, with low bows.

"Well, well, Seaford—Hamilton, eh, eh?" cried the king, "what is it?"

"We thought your majesty spoke."

"Spoke—spoke? To be sure we did. Was it not you, eh, you, Seaford, who said something to us about Blanchard?"

"I had the honor, your majesty," said Lord Seaford; "but it was with no view of being in any way detrimental to Colonel Blanchard."

"Well, well: of course not—of course not. What was it, eh?"

"I had the honor of stating that Colonel Blanchard seems to be very unhappy."

"Unhappy, eh, eh? Well, well?"

"And that he seems to be under some very strange influence, and to be obliged to obey the directions of somebody or something, whenever he or it shall choose."

"What, what, what! Something or somebody? Don't comprehend. What do you mean, eh? Ha, ha! caught you there, Seaford. Stupid as you look—not always so, though; some stupid-looking people not stupid at all—not the case with you, Seaford."

"Your majesty—"

"That will do, eh? Well, go on. Wager you a guinea, eh, a guinea?"

"About what, your majesty?"

"That you can't explain to me all about Colonel Blanchard, eh? Can you, eh?"

"I must confess, your majesty, that I cannot; and if your majesty will please to remember that is what I was saying to your majesty, and therefore—"

"Lost, lost! ha, ha! Won, won! Hand out your guinea, Seaford—hand it out. Quite as stupid as you look, you are; you shouldn't lay wagers, eh?—sure to lose."

"But, your majesty, I am not aware that I—"

"Eh, what? Hamilton, eh, appeal to you—appeal to you. He has lost, eh?"

"Most decidedly, your majesty."

"There, you see, eh? Hamilton gives it against you. Come, hand out the guinea."

With a low bow, Lord Seaford produced a guinea, which the king put in his pocket with manifest pleasure. In fact, so delighted was he with this little bit of plunder, that he was quite gracious, and with many nods and winks added:

"Come, now, what is it all about? Out with the truth."

"About Colonel Blanchard, your majesty?"

"Just so. Now for it."

"Why, your majesty, Colonel Blanchard, who has the good fortune to stand high in your majesty's esteem, and who has so very recently been presented by your majesty with the Cumberland regiment of Guards—"

"Coldstreams? Yes, Coldstreams. All right—go on."

"Well, your majesty, the colonel is evidently very unhappy."

"Eh—what?"

"Very unhappy; and the only society he seems to like is that of his cousin."

"Cousin, cousin—eh! What cousin?"

"The young man your majesty, at his so-

licitation, was pleased to give the ensigncy to in the same regiment."

"Oh, yes, yes. What's his name, eh? Ruffert, Hubert, eh—what—what?"

"Harold Blanchard, your majesty."

"What—h, Harold? name of old king of Saxons, eh? or some other people—don't exactly recollect. Well, what of him?"

"Your majesty, then, will be surprised to hear that at times the colonel will receive a note, and if he is on duty, he will leave the major in command; if he is in attendance on your majesty, he will feign illness, and go away at once. In fact, it would appear that he was under the orders of some superior power which he dare not disobey."

"Stuff! stuff! stuff!"

Lord Seaford bowed.

"Good mind to lay you another wager, Seaford, that you are all wrong."

"Oh, your majesty—"

"Stop! Eh—what! did you pay me that guinea, eh? I don't feel it in my pocket. Sure I had it, eh?"

"Quite sure, your majesty."

"Don't be so positive and obstinate, Seaford. Appeal to you Hamilton, eh—eh? Did Seaford pay us, eh?"

"I don't think he did, your majesty," replied Lord Hamilton, with a low bow.

"There, there! hand it over, Seaford. That will do. You see, now, Hamilton, he has paid! What, what! who is this? Somebody coming."

An officer, in full dress as lieutenant-colonel of the guards, slowly advanced down the pathway.

"It is Blanchard," said Lord Seaford, in a low tone. "I only wish I could get rid of him. I want the colonelcy myself!"

"Ha, ha! halloo, Blanchard! here you are!" cried the king. "Well, how goes it with you? Sold yourself, they say, to the what's-his-name, eh?"

"Your majesty!"

"Well, well! don't believe it myself, but Seaford says so."

"My lord!" said Colonel Blanchard, turning his pale face toward Lord Seaford.

"Nay, colonel, it was but a jest."

"A sorry one, my lord."

"I did not mean to wound you, colonel."

"Wound me! Oh no, my lord,"

"He jests at scars who never felt a wound!"

As he spoke, Colonel Blanchard slightly touched the hilt of his sword.

"Come, come," said the king, "no quarrelling—won't have it—won't indeed; shake hands—meet. Come, shake hands."

"On your majesty's order," said Lord Seaford.

"I have really no quarrel with my Lord Seaford," said Colonel Blanchard, looking paler, if possible, than usual, and that usual paleness in him was quite remarkable.

The two courtiers shook hands ceremoniously.

"All's right—all's right," cried the king.

"Now, Blanchard, what's the news? Caught him, eh—caught him?"

"No, your majesty."

"Eh—what!"

"I am afraid those who gave your majesty advice to send a party of your guards in search of a highwayman, brought but little judgment to bear on the matter."

"Well, it was Albemarle. You see, his coach was stopped on the Richmond road by this—this—"

"Owlet," said Lord Seaford.

"Yes, Owlet—Owlet. But I don't believe all that is said of him; it can't be, you know, eh? A man, you know, sirs, can't be an owl, and an owl can't be a man, eh? What do you say to that Hamilton? Lay you a guinea about it."

"I am sorry, your majesty, that I have not a guinea with me, but Seaford has."

"No," said Lord Seaford, drily; "I only had two."

"Well, well, my lords, you can each of you owe me a guinea, and pay me to-night, since I have won."

A faint smile flickered for a moment over the face of Colonel Blanchard, as he said:

"We went, your majesty, the whole length of the road, and, in fact, patrolled it all night, but we have seen nor heard nothing of this highwayman who is called the Owlet."

"Strange—strange!"

"It is, indeed, sire," said Lord Seaford; "for my Lord Albemarle assured me that his

coach was stopped, and that his coachman was so terrified that he fell off the box, and was in danger of being trampled upon by his own horses, and that the horses themselves were frightened."

"Bless me! Eh—eh?"

"Yes, your majesty; and when he said that there came to the window of the carriage a mounted man, I was going to say—"

"What? What?"

"But when he saw the face, it was not human, but bore an exact resemblance to an owl."

"Eh!"

"An owl, your majesty—a green—a sickly green sort of color was over it. And the feathers, and beak, and eyes, were perfectly and exactly, those of an owl of very large size. Surprised—and he owns terrified—he gave up his purse and watch; and the creature, be it human or otherwise, galloped off!"

"And you can't catch him, Blanchard? Eh?"

"I cannot, sire. But—"

Colonel Blanchard's pale face flushed for one half-moment with color, and then seemed to be paler than before.

"Well?—well?"

"But if your majesty will condescend to allow me to make a communication to you—"

"Certainly—certainly. Come on—come on. My lords, we dismiss you from further attendance at present. Good-day—good-day. Come along Blanchard—come along."

Lords Hamilton and Seaford bowed low; and were glad enough to go back to the palace.

The king walked on with Colonel Blanchard.

"Well, now, what is it?"

"Your majesty, I am sure, will allow me to make an appeal of mercy to you."

"Mercy? Eh? What?"

"A young girl has been condemned to death for a robbery at a goldsmith and jeweler's in the city."

"Well? Well?"

"This morning is appointed for her execution at Tyburn. There are doubts even of her guilt; but if guilty, it is to be hoped that your majesty will graciously spare her life."

"Can't do it!"

"But by your majesty's gracious permission, I will ask this as a personal favor."

"Can't do it! Steal people's goods—eh? Hang her! Let her be hanged! Can't possibly interfere!"

"But, she is so very young—"

"Don't say another word—too late!"

"Nay, your majesty, if you would graciously—by an exercise of your royal prerogative, grant a pardon to this young creature, who is only seventeen years of age—"

"No!—No!—No!"

"A Fleet horse would convey it in ample time to Newgate."

"No; I say! I can't do it. People steal and people must be hung. Quite natural—eh? The man, Colonel Blanchard, who in my dominion would wrong another even out of a guinea, on any pretence, ought to be hung."

"I am sorry!"

"So am I—so am I! Always sorry! Fine day—that is, not very fine. Can't help it—all over soon. Hungry—eh? Hungry?"

"No; your majesty. What a magnificent Spanish chestnut that is round the copse yonder!"

"To be sure it is—to be sure! Eh? Why, here we are. What a walk we have had to sure! Come along—come along. Breakfast—breakfast waiting."

"Broiled trout."

"What—what?"

"I was only remarking to myself, sire, that I had ordered some trout that was sent me from town to be broiled for my breakfast; and I never, in all my life, saw such magnificent fish."

"Eh? No!"

"Mag-ni-ficent! And if I had only dared to take such a liberty—"

"What—eh? What?"

George the Third looked eagerly into the face of Colonel Blanchard, and his eyes opened wider than ever, and seemed to protrude farther from his head.

"What? What?"

"If I had dared to offer them to your majesty."

"You may—"

"My gracious sovereign!"

"Don't mention it. Offer them. Run—run! Stay—stop—eh? No, run!"

"I will run back to the palace, and they can be cooked and ready for your majesty by the time your majesty has leisurely walked back."

"Just so; run—run! That's it. Broiled trout, and all for nothing too, in September. Eh?—what? To be sure; an excellent fellow that Blanchard—a most excellent fellow. Hem! He owes me a guinea, I think: must recollect that. Sure, though that Hamilton and Seaford do. Ha! ha! Shouldn't lay wagers—oh dear, no! Let her hang—let her hang! What is it to me? Shouldn't take other folks' goods—eh?"

The nearest way back to the palace was completely round the copse, close to the magnificent Spanish chestnuts, which Colonel Blanchard had pointed out to the special admiration of the king; and George the Third, who was perfectly well acquainted with Kew gardens, knew that well, and walked along accord ngly.

But the copse was densely wooded.

The Spanish chestnuts were still in full leaf, and the shade and the seclusion of the spot, for the space of about fifty paces, was complete.

Directly on the other side of some large bay bushes was a public road, and the king was opposite to the densest of these bushes, when he became aware of a footstep advancing, as if to meet him, in the opposite direction.

By the curve of the path, the person approaching was hidden from his sight.

"Hilloa! Hilloa!" cried the king. "Who is it?—who is it? You Hill—is it you?"

There was no reply.

The king advanced, and so did the person whose footsteps he had heard; but although they neither walked hastily, yet as they were approaching each other, the short distance was soon passed over. One tree, projecting some low branches half-way across the path, only intervened.

"Come, come! Who are you, eh?—eh?"

The footsteps stopped, but the king went on. He was past the tree in another moment, and face to face with the intruder. A cry of surprise and terror burst from the lips of the king.

Standing immediately before him, on the somewhat narrow path, was a tall figure, enveloped in a brown cloak from neck to heels.

But the head was visible—horribly visible.

The face bore the perfect likeness to an owl. The feathers; the beak; the large, circular eyes; the ears, too, stood up sharp and erect amid the small feathers that fringed them; and, in fact, the whole head of this otherwise seemingly man was the head of a gigantic species of owl.

The king turned once completely round; and then he sought, by instant flight, to escape the dreaded presence of the owl highwayman.

A voice arrested him.

The voice came from the strange throat of the owl.

"King, if you attempt to stir from the spot on which you are now, I will cleave your head to the neck, and not a cry but your death one shall awaken an echo!"

The king stood rooted to the spot. A cold perspiration broke out upon his brow—upon every limb.

The owl had spoken in a voice that sounded just like the half-articulate efforts of the parrot and cockatoo species to converse.

Then the brown cloak that had enveloped the owl was loosened by some means at the neck, and it fell slowly from off his figure to the ground.

Beneath, he was richly dressed.

He wore a coat of scarlet cloth, heavily trimmed with gold-lace; a vest of white silk, embroidered with pearls; tight-fitting, white-leather pantaloons, and riding-boots, which, without a wrinkle, reached to the knees. Gold spurs adorned their heels.

A cravat, apparently entirely of lace, was folded once round his throat, and a gold chain, of curious and rare workmanship, showed itself at intervals around his neck and upon his breast.

Suspended by a gold swivel was a pair of chamais-leather gloves, edged with lace.

By another swivel was a hat looped up with a ruby, and with a long, drooping, white feather, tipped with scarlet.

A long, straight sword hung by his side, and, indeed, trailed on the ground. Protruding from the breast of his apparel were the rich, gold-mounted butts of a pair of pistols.

"Mercy!" gasped the king. "What! what!"

"Silence."

"Yes—yes—yes—yes!"

"You are George the Third, of these realms?"

"I—a—yes! Eh? What?"

"Silence! Only reply to what I ask."

"I—oh, yes! Very well."

"Do you know me?"

"The—a—a—"

"Owlet!"

George the Third rubbed his hands together, and said something inarticulately about broiled trout.

"Listen!" added the Owllet, in that strange voice, which was so like the croaking tones of a parrot. "You have a choice to make."

"A—a—choice?"

"Yes, between death and your signature to this paper."

"What—a—eh?"

"This paper. It is you alone who can pardon one who robs; and there is one who would fain, up to this date, be so pardoned. Refuse, and you die."

"Do you think I am a fool? Die, indeed—eh? What? No—certainly not! Ah! I see—you want to be pardoned?"

"Be it so. Sign."

"To be sure. But—"

"How?—you were about to say. Here is ink; here a pen; here a pardon drawn up regularly; here a desk. Sign!"

The Owllet presented the crown of the king's hat, which he took with a sudden jerk off his head, for a desk; a pen he took from among the feathers of his owl's head; and a small bottle of ink he produced from a pocket in his vest.

"Sign!" he added, as he spread out a parchment before the king.

The words "special pardon" were at the top of the paper.

The king's eyes twinkled a little, as he muttered to himself:

"It's informal! I'll hang him, when he is caught, for all this. Hem! Well, well—"

"Sign!"

"There!"

"GEORGE REX."

"That will do. And now, a question."

"That will do. Well, well. All right! Good day, Mr. a—a—Owlet—eh? What—what?"

"Another step, and your are a corpse."

"But—"

"Peace, I say! Reply to me, and move not. Do you recollect a lady by the name of the Lady Adela Salisbury?"

The king's countenance paled a shade.

"Speak!"

"Well, I—a—do."

"That is well. Did she, on the 4th day of January, in the year your father died, hold you by the breast of your apparel, and make a declaration to you which so maddened you, that you—you struck her?"

The king's face paled still further, and twice he opened his mouth as if to speak before the words came forth. Then he said, in a gasping kind of a way, as if he had not air enough in which to form the words:

"She—did."

"And you?"

"I—did."

"What was the declaration?"

"The—a—a—"

"What was the declaration made to you on that occasion by Adela Salisbury?"

"That she was legally married to my father."

"Kneel!"

"Eh?"

"Kneel, I say!"

"Murder!"

"It will be, if you refuse!"

The owl took one of his pistols from his breast, and the sharp click of the lock fell alarmingly upon the ears of George the Third.

He knelt, as directed.

The Owllet took the large brown cloak from the ground, and flung it by one movement right over the head and form of the king. With a cry of fear, then George the Third fell on his hands and knees, and looked like some great animated bundle beneath the cloak.

"Remain for ten minutes, and you will be safe," said the Owllet. "Stir before that time, and your death will be on your own head!"

"Murder!"

"Silence!"

Another moment, and all was still.

A bird on a bough of one of the Spanish chestnuts alone broke the silence of the sylvan spot, by caroling a song to its mate.

CHAPTER IV.

THE REPRIEVE.

We left that terrible cavalcade of men, horses, officials, and wild-heaving, shouting crowd, which was escorting Alice Home to death, at a juncture when despair appeared to have taken possession of the young girl, never again to be dislodged from that fair abiding-place until the gentle spirit should wing its flight to heaven.

Crushed—heart-crushed—and deceived, condemned in innocence: and no mercy, even where her guilt was presumed proved, and where, notwithstanding, mercy was most loudly called for, mocked by the semblance of a hope of life—that life which, to the young, is so bright a possession, that, as it nears its apparent end, all other of earth's treasures, and hopes, and fears fade into the worthless dust which fairy gold leaves behind it—mocked by a hope, at that moment, which so faded at the first glance she achieved of the eyes of Jonas Brand after she had told him the secret he required of her—no wonder that poor Alice sunk back in the death-cart, and despaired.

But she had seen Gerald. She had heard Gerald utter her name.

Ah, Alice you are not yet forsaken. There is yet a human link which holds the chain of your young life to earth. Gerald is at hand—Gerald loves you still.

And so, after the despair of the moment—after the subsidence, so to speak, of that one faint glimpse of hope that had, like a gleam of wintry sunshine, darted through the cloud-rifts of her despair, Alice opened her eyes again, and spoke faintly.

"Gerald—Gerald!"

"My dear child," said the clergyman—and he, too, was weeping as he spoke—"my dear child, do not think now of aught else but Heaven."

"He loves me—"

"Yes, He who is above all earthly love."

"Gerald loves me—Gerald—Gerald!"

The clergyman shook his head.

"It is hard," he said, "for the young to die. God help us all! I wish that this young thing had come to my house and taken all I possessed, how gladly I would pardon it for this young life."

Then Alice rose up, and clinging to the side of the cart, she stretched forth her other hand, and in a voice of seeming entreaty, she called out:

"Gerald—Gerald, save me—save me!"

And Gerald was still—so to speak—in the hands of the people, and once again he called out to her:

"Alice—Alice, I am here!"

But he did not say that he could save her.

The officers, headed by Jonas Brand, now made a brutal charge among the people, and along the narrow hollow way that lies at the foot of Holborn Hill. It seemed likely that a fearful scene was about to ensue.

Oaths, shrieks, shouts, yells, and struggles; a wild commingling for a few moments of horses, officers, coaches, carts, men, women, and even little children, made up a scene of contention and horror.

Alice rose up in the cart, her fair hair showered about her; she lifted up her hands despairingly.

"No—no!" she cried; "not for me—oh, not for me all this courage and all this suffering! I will die! I am content to die!"

"Alice—Alice!" screamed Gerald.

"Charge!" shouted Jonas Brand.

"Send for the military!" cried the sheriff, from his carriage window.

One swinging blow from a flat piece of board that was being used as a weapon by a herculean fellow in the crowd, sent the sheriff's head back into the coach again, as though it had been obliterated by the touch of the wood.

Then Gerald was borne forward by the crowd, right to the side of the cart, or within a few feet of it.

"Alice—dear Alice, I am here! Here to live for you, or to die with you!"

She saw his wild, excited face; she saw his blood-shot eyes; his bleeding hands; the dashing tumult of his disordered hair, and she stretched out her arms.

"Yes, Gerald—I would not tell you when we were both prosperous, and safe, and happy; but now—now, dear Gerald—"

"Alice—my Alice!"

"Yes, your Alice! I do love you!"

With a spring that sent the brawny man who was supporting him backward among the people's feet, Gerald leaped into the cart.

"I am here! Death alone shall separate us now! I am here—here with you, Alice—my own, my beautiful, my Alice!"

He twined his arms around her; and the tears streamed from her eyes, and fell upon his fevered cheek.

"It is our bridal, Alice," he said.

"O God—O God! and I am so loved!"

"Forever—forever!"

"Gerald, they will kill you!"

"Yes, Alice; yet will I speak! I will proclaim again and again your innocence!"

He was on his knees in the cart. Alice was standing erect in it. His left arm was around her, and he stretched forth his right toward the agitated mass of human heads before him, and in a loud, high voice of awful energy he spoke:

"People, human hearts, fathers, mothers, little children, who may hear me, and speak of this day in time to come, this is murder! You who love those near and dear to you—you who have homes, and feelings, and hopes—hopes of dear joy, with the chosen ones of your best affections, hear me, for murder is about to be done. This girl—this dear, good, beauteous angel—this Alice Home, who never had a thought that was not born of heaven, and never did an act that God's ministering angels might not aid her in, is condemned to die. But she is innocent—innocent. It is murder—murder—murder!"

Then the mob swayed to and fro, and the yells, and the shouts, and the screams made up a chorus of sounds that defies description.

And still the cavalcade of death was in the valley of the Fleet.

Suddenly, then, a roar of half dismay, half execration, burst from the crowd.

At a smart trot, a troop of what was then called the King's Light Horse came from Fleet street, and made its way down past Fleet Market, by the side of the old Fleet prison for debtors.

The gleam of the helmets of the soldiery was distinctly visible over the heads of the crowd.

The rattle of their arms and accoutrements came plainly on every ear, in the lull that suddenly ensued in the Babel of sounds that had but a moment before agitated the air.

The crowd surged on one side, like a great wave.

Over the market—scattering the frail sheds and odd-shaped buildings made of boards, and baskets, and bundles, in all directions swept the mob, and the way was clear for the light horse.

"Halt!" cried the officer in command. Threes to the left. Forward!"

The troop made a sweep round the corner, on to Holborn Hill.

The mob in another wide, dense wave found refuge in the courts and alleys to the right. The way was clear.

"Dash on!" shouted Jonas Brand.

The officers made a rush up the hill.

"Now, young fellow," cried one of the constables, as he leant over the side of the cart, and grasped Gerald by the collar. "Now young fellow, you will get out and be off, and think yourself lucky."

"Let him be," said Jonas Brand, with a slight smile, "I want him."

"Very good, Mr. Brand, but I thought—"

"Which you had no business to do. I want him, and he is safe where he is. Forward now."

The officer in command of the Light Horse rode up to the sheriff's carriage, and stooping down from his horse, at the window, he said: "I think, Mr. Sheriff, you will get on all right now, without me or my men."

The sheriff presented his face at the window, and the officer started back.

"By Jove!"

The flat board had recently made a dead level of the sheriff's face, and his nose was very much disorganized.

"Charge—fire—kill—no mercy on them!" cried the sheriff.

"My good sir!"

"I am not a good sir. Look at me!"

The officer suppressed a smile, and trotted off to the head of his troop.

"Forward!"

The Light Horse swept up the hill.

"I will see them to the Oxford Road," said the officer to himself, "and no further."

The cavalcade now made rapid progress; and although ten thousand people followed it, there was no attempt at interruption or rescue.

And Alice sunk down on her knees in the cart, and placed both her hands upon the breast of Gerald, while tears gushed from her eyes.

Gerald looked as pale as death, and shook in every limb.

He had not tasted food for thirty hours.

The clergyman was much affected, and kept shaking his head, and saying weak things to himself.

The hangman was looking savage, and swearing in an under-tone; for some one had flung a brick at him from the crowd, and it had inflicted an ugly wound on his temple, from which the blood was slowly trickling.

Then Alice spoke to Gerald:

"My dear Gerald, you hear me?"

"Yes," he gasped.

"When I am gone, you must not grieve for me, my dear Gerald."

"O God!"

"Nay, indeed, you must not; because you know, my dear Gerald, that I am innocent, and that I shall be in heaven; and that, if it be possible for those who go first to watch over those still on earth who are dear to them, I will so watch over you, my dear Gerald."

"Break! break!" cried Gerald. And he struck his heart as he spoke.

"No, my Gerald, you must not break your heart! Indeed, you must not."

"Alice—Alice! it is breaking!"

"Do not say so, my love!"

Gerald could not bear this. She was now for the first time using toward him these endearing expressions that she had never before approached. Each one wrung his heart, and it was with difficulty he could keep back the screams of anguish which each moment seemed to be starting to his lips.

"Nay, Gerald, you must be calmer now, or I cannot speak to you."

"O Heaven!"

"Hush! hush! This, you know, my dear Gerald, is our last interview here."

"Here?"

"Yes; but we shall surely have many in heaven—shall we not, dear?"

"Alice! Alice!"

"Let me go on. I wish now to tell you all. Gerald, you know that I am an orphan—no father, no mother, no brother, no sister; not one human soul that is akin to me, that I knew of, in all the world!"

"Yes!" sobbed Gerald.

"But I was educated carefully by the good, kind friend, who only one year since by her death left me alone to fight my way in the world; and then you know that good, kind Mr. Tularong, the canon of St. Paul's, recommended me to Mr. Ambrose as a teacher to his two little girls."

"Yes—yes! God bless the day! O God! no—no! It has come to this."

"And there, Gerald, you saw me"

"Yes. I, his apprentice, saw you come into the house like an angel, Alice."

"Nay—nay!"

"It was so. There seemed to come in with you a ray of light as from heaven."

"You saw me, Gerald, and were always kind, and gentle, and good to me; and, one day, you ventured to come after me when I left the house. Do you remember, Gerald?"

"Oh, yes—yes!"

"And you clasped your hands together, and you told me that you loved me."

"Yes—oh, yes! It was so true."

"I know it was, dear. But I was coy, and shy, and strange, and would not speak to you."

"No," sighed Gerald.

"But, dear, I did love you then."

A gush of tears came from Gerald's eyes. Alice rested her head for one moment on his breast, and then she took one of his thin, broken, bruised hands in hers, and kissed it.

"God bless you, Gerald!"

He could bear no more. Madness was surely in his brain. He sprang to his feet.

"Help—help! God, help us! If there be no help on earth, there should be from heaven! Hold! you there; you—you, Jonas Brand; you—yes, surely, that will do. That—that should do, Jonas Brand, Jonas Brand!"

"What now?" demanded the officer, as he checked his horse and bent his brutal gaze upon Gerald.

"Look you here, Jonas Brand. At this last moment I have something to say to you. I cannot keep it any longer. So, you see, I will say it."

"What is it?"

"Alice Home is innocent!"

"Ha! You have said that often enough, my lad; and once too often, I take it—for I mean to lock you up after the execution."

"Hear me out! Hear all—all."

"Bo—bah!"

"I say she is innocent, because I took the bracelet from Mr. Ambrose. I took it, do you see? I am guilty alone—you comprehend, Mr. Jonas Brand? So you can let Alice go free; free as air, since I proclaim myself to be the real criminal."

"O Gerald! Gerald!" said Alice. "There is a tell-tale spirit in your eyes, which will not let you say that which is untrue, and make it look like truth. I am innocent, Gerald, and so are you."

"Oh, let me—let me!"

"All that is nothing to me," said Jonas Brand. "You can accuse yourself after the hanging."

"But it is to save her."

"I know it," laughed Brand, as he gave his horse the spur and rode on.

"It is all in vain, Gerald; and it should be all in vain," said Alice. "Let me die!"

The cavalcade had reached the Oxford Road, and the troop of Light Horse trotted on in advance the officer—intending to take the first wide turning to the left, and so got back to the barracks at the King's Mews at Charing Cross.

"Now, on!" shouted Jonas Brand.

The Oxford Road was tolerably clear of obstruction. It was but one mile and a half to Tyburn, and at once the whole cavalcade set off at a hard trot.

The powerful horse that drew the cart was not a whit behind-hand, and the crowd found themselves soon distanced by the speed at which the death-procession went toward the place of execution.

It was a quarter to nine o'clock, now.

CHAPTER V.

THE RESCUE FROM DEATH.

The hangman began to uncoil from round his waist a cord, which at intervals he gave a sharp pull to, in order to test its strength.

For a moment, Gerald thought that his senses would leave him, and that the dreadful catastrophe of death to Alice would happen, while he swooned; but, by a violent effort, he baffled the feeling of faintness, and once again looked in her fair face.

How pale she was!

The rain had begun to stream from her fair hair—head-dress she had none—and she shuddered and moaned at intervals.

The sheriff's carriage had gone faster even than the officers' horses, and it could now be seen halted about a quarter of a mile ahead. That was at Tyburn gate.

An immense mob was already on the ground; and following, although yet some distance behind the cavalcade, was the throng of persons who had accompanied the procession from the city.

Groans, hisses, and shouts of execration greeted the arrival of the cavalcade at the place of execution; and even Jonas Brand slightly changed color as he saw the sea of human heads and faces before him.

"Mitchelson," he said, "you must close round the tree" (the gallows).

"Yes, Mr. Brand."

"And tell Mapes to get the affair over quickly."

"Yes, Mr. Brand."

The cart stopped.

And now the clergyman rose, and considered that it was his duty to say something; but he was so shaken and affected by all that had occurred, that he had lost all command of his voice, and could only shake his head, and repeat some prayer quite unintelligibly.

The mode of execution was for the con-

demned to be taken in the cart beneath the gallows—the rope to be placed round the neck—and then the cart driven away, leaving them suspended.

The cart was now under the gallows.

"Now, my little chicken," said the hangman, "it is soon over, I assure you, and you will think nothing of it."

With a cry of rage, Gerald flung himself upon the hangman, and grappled him by the throat.

"Hilloa! Hoy! Help! The young tiger will choke me!"

A couple of officers sprang into the cart.

A roaring yell arose from the crowd; and then, at the moment that, from pure want of breath, there was a partial silence, one loud and ringing voice cried out:

"A reprieve!"

The officers in the cart ceased to struggle with Gerald; Alice dashed aside the clustering hair from her face, and uttered a shriek; the brutal Jonas Brand drew a pistol from his saddle-holster, and yelled out:

"A lie! It is false!"

The clergyman raised both his hands, and finding his voice in a moment, he cried:

"Where? What reprieve? Who has it?"

"A reprieve!" again shouted the loud, clear, sonorous voice.

Then the mob, which seemed as if it had been only pausing to collect breath to do so, burst into such a ringing cheer that its echoes spread far and wide over London.

"A reprieve!" cried the voice again.

At the farthest extremity of the crowd, on the Bayswater road, could be seen a horseman; his right hand was elevated above his head, and in it was something that looked like a folded paper.

"A reprieve!" he cried again.

The crowd opened right and left. A lane of human faces—human breasts—and cheering human throats was made; and, with his horse one reek of foam, his own face pale and bloodless, and without a hat, the horseman galloped on, still holding up his right arm above his head.

"A reprieve!"

Once again he shouted the welcome sound; and then, within fifty paces of the gallows, his horse staggered and fell—and horse and rider were lost to sight.

Fifty hands lifted the rider.

Fifty—a hundred hands lifted the horse.

The rider smiled faintly.

The horse was dead.

"A hard gallop," he said. "Eleven miles in forty minutes! Am I in time?"

"Hurra! hurra! hurra!" shouted the mob.

They lifted the bold rider in their arms; with a surge, they brought him to the gallows foot, and he held up the paper he had in his right hand, as he said:

"Where is the sheriff? This is a pardon for Alice Home, signed this morning by his majesty the king. Where is the sheriff?"

"Sir, I am here," said the sheriff, as he rose up in his coach—the top of which was made to open, and had been, by his orders, cast loose, that he might do his duty, and see that the execution was performed.

"Then, Mr. Sheriff, this is for you."

"Oh! ah! dear me!"

"Sir?"

"It's all right, young man. Who may you be?"

"King's messenger."

"Oh! ah! God save the king! Good people, this is a pardon in full, and an order for the instant release of Alice Home; and dated this morning, at Kew."

Another cheer from the mob.

"No doubt—no doubt about it?"

"You know his majesty's signature, Mr. Sheriff, I presume?" said the messenger.

"O dear, yes! It's right enough, Mr. Brand."

"Yes, sir."

"You must release the prisoner."

"But, sir—"

"Can't help it. Here is his majesty's order."

"She can go back to Newgate, Mr. Sheriff, and then Mr. Mould can do as he pleases."

"No!" said the messenger.

"And who are you, that says 'no,' I should like to know?"

"I am one who will make your knaves' bones ache, my friend, if you are insolent! Listen to me, good people all. Here is a full pardon from the king, which the sheriff says

is sufficient, and that the prisoner should be immediately released; but this thief-taker, Jonas Brand, resists it. I call upon you all, in the king's name, to help the sheriff and the king!"

Jonas Brand turned pale.

There was a tremendous roar from the crowd, and a rush of many thousands of people.

Sheriff, officers, cart, gallows, king's messenger, and people were, in another moment, all mingled up together in a mass of confusion.

But the messenger made himself heard by those about him.

"Help me, good folks," he said. "A coach—a coach—a coach for me and the pardoned girl!"

A hackney-coach was forcibly seized upon; and the messenger, springing into the cart, cried out fiercely:

"Where is Alice Home?"

"Here!" said Gerald. "She has swooned."

"Out of the way! What is this?"

"God bless you!—ever and ever bless you, sir!"

Gerald had flung his arms round the neck of the messenger, and fairly embraced him.

"Why—why, who are you?"

"I love her, sir, and—and she—"

"Oh I see! Well, then, you had better follow me!"

"With all my heart!"

The messenger caught up Alice as though she had been no heavier than a child, and at one bound he was out of the cart with her. Gerald followed.

The hackney-coach was gained instantly, and they were all three within it. Some previous directions must have been given to the driver; for he set off at as hard a pace as his horses would go, and soon dived down a narrow street in the Oxford Road, close to where Regent street now stands.

CHAPTER VI.

COLONEL BLANCHARD.

The exigencies of our story enforce a rapid change from place to place; but soon these apparently fragmental portions will combine and form one harmonious whole, from which shall arise such human action and human feeling as shall illustrate as strange a page in the domestic history of England as was ever opened to public gaze.

We now transport the reader to what is called the "Guard Room" of old St. James' Palace.

Close to the court-yard, which goes by the name of the "Color Court," there exists an ancient apartment, in which the officers who are on guard are accustomed to sit. Adjoining to this guard-room is a suite of three other rooms, which, for the time he is on duty, belongs to the officer in command of the palace guard.

It is to the largest of these rooms that we would conduct the reader.

It is an apartment of about twenty-four feet square, and its windows look directly into the "Color Court." A bright sea-coal fire is burning in the grate. The finely-carved marble chimney-piece is warm to the touch. The old painting of the walls has a sombre tint, and the massive furniture—from which the gilding is passing away—is of an age long anterior to the Georges.

Yet about the room there is an air of substantial comfort, and indeed magnificence, which gives it a regal aspect, and proclaims it to be part and parcel of a palace.

On the table lies the sword of the officer in command of the palace guard.

That officer himself is pacing the room with his hands clasped behind his back, and there are lines of deep thought upon his pale face.

No one who had seen that face once could ever again mistake it.

Colonel Blanchard is the officer who, with agitated steps, marches to and fro in that chamber. He is in full uniform as lieutenant-colonel of the Coldstream Regiment of Foot-Guards, and he is a man who becomes his rank and dress; but what a look of anguish there is upon his face!

For a full half-hour he continues the restless march to and fro in the room, and then with an embroidered handkerchief he wiped his brow, as he flung himself with an air of exhaustion into a chair.

"It will drive me mad!" he said; "that will be the end of it. I know that it will drive me mad!"

He was then silent for a few moments, and appeared to be in deep thought.

"No!" he then said. "No! I cannot kill him. No! I cannot lose my soul in that fashion! The fearful oath he made me take rings yet in my ears. Oh, it is horrible!—most horrible! But although I cannot kill him, yet I can die myself. Ah! some one comes."

There was a tap at the door of the room; and the colonel made an effort to compose his features to calmness, as he said, in as collected a voice as he could:

"Come in—come in!"

The door was opened, and an orderly sergeant made his appearance.

"Well, what is it?"

The sergeant respectfully saluted his colonel as he said:

"Please your honor, it is ten o'clock."

"Ten o'clock! What then?"

"Please your honor, you ordered me to come to your honor at ten o'clock."

"Yes—yes! I recollect now. Shut the door."

"Yes, your honor."

"Sergeant, I am still very uneasy about the possible fate of Captain Beauchamp!"

"So are we all, your honor."

"His mysterious disappearance is a very serious—I was almost going to say—reproach to the regiment. What do the men say about it, sergeant?"

"Why, your honor, they say as how that they can't make it out at all, your honor; and young Mr. Charles Beauchamp has been among the men for the last day or two about it."

"What does he want?"

"Why, your honor, he wants to get from the men what he calls memoranda of all the outgoings and incomings of the captain, on the last day he was seen alive; and you see, sir—"

A sharp tap at the door at this moment, interrupted the sergeant, and Colonel Blanchard started to his feet.

The sergeant opened the door, and there appeared on the threshold a young man of care-worn aspect, and almost as pale as the colonel himself. He bowed courteously, as he said:

"Colonel Blanchard, my name is Beauchamp—"

"Beauchamp?"

"Yes, Charles Beauchamp, I am the twin brother of Captain Beauchamp, of whom nothing now has been heard for six weeks, two days, and one hour. Sir, I wish to speak with you."

Colonel Blanchard bowed, and motioned to the sergeant to leave the room. When the door was closed, Colonel Blanchard, whose lips now were almost white, pointed to a chair, as he said:

"Pray, sir, accept a chair, and my sincerest sympathies."

The young man sat down, and fixed his black eyes full on the face of Colonel Blanchard, who found this scrutiny, silent as it was, so distressing that he was fain to break it by saying:

"I think Captain Beauchamp did once say that he had a twin-brother named Charles."

The visitor bowed slightly.

"You will permit me, sir, to offer you refreshment?"

"Certainly not, sir!"

"Sir?"

There had been a something so cold and harsh about the manner in which these words, "certainly not!" were uttered, that they might without much sensitiveness have been deemed offensive.

"No, sir," added Charles Beauchamp, "I do not come for refreshment; but to ask you a few plain questions."

"Sir, you will permit me to say, then, that you do not come in a manner which is likely to procure answers to your questions."

"I am, perhaps, unfortunate in manner, Colonel Blanchard; but yet I hope for the answer to at least one question I shall put to you. I have been making inquiries concerning my lost brother, and I have discovered something."

"I congratulate you."

"I congratulate myself, sir. The discovery is, that on the night of his disappearance,

at a quarter-past one o'clock, he was seen with you in St. James' square!"

"Seen with me in St. James' square?"

"Yes, Colonel Blanchard! And in the deposition you have made concerning him, you have stated that the last you saw of him was at half-past nine o'clock that evening preceding, when he left you here to go home, after coming to you to say that he did not feel quite well."

Colonel Blanchard was silent for a few seconds, and then, with a great command of temper and voice, he said: "Is that all, sir?"

"That is the beginning."

"Then it is untrue—that is all; and whoever has told you so much has told you what is false!"

"No, Colonel Blanchard!"

"Sir?"

The colonel rose instantly, and looked sternly at his visitor, who likewise gained his feet.

"No, colonel!" added Charles Beauchamp, "that statement is not false; and I demand of you my brother!"

"You are mad, sir!"

"No, neither am I mad; but I demand of you how it came about that you were with my brother in St. James' square at one o'clock in the morning, and that, he never having been heard of since, you concealed that fact?"

"It is no fact."

"I assert it."

"Then, Mr. Beauchamp, I fancy your object is accomplished, which must have been to insult me."

"Colonel Blanchard, I offer you an alternative. You shall make a clean breast of this transaction, and tell me all you know about my brother, or you shall give me a meeting."

"I understand you, sir; and will gratify you."

"It is well, sir. When, and where?"

"Sir, if you fancy I am going to meet you in deadly conflict in any manner contrary to the usages of gentlemen, you are mistaken. I will accept a hostile message from you, so soon as it is brought to me by proper hands."

"It shall arrive, Colonel Blanchard."

The colonel bowed.

Another moment, and Charles Beauchamp was gone.

Colonel Blanchard flung himself on a chair, and clasping his hands over his eyes, he uttered a deep groan.

"Another—another!" he said. "I must kill him now! I must kill him! O Fate—fate!"

"Who blames Fate, colonel?" cried a light, cheerful voice. "Fate is conduct, and conduct is fate. Ha! ha! The Mall is full of the *élite* of fashion. The queen has shown herself at Buckingham House, and—halloa! What now!"

Colonel Blanchard sprang from his chair, and grasped the intruder by the arm, as in a voice of concentrated fury, he said:

"Villain! fiend! devil! you must seek my destruction!"

"Hey-day, colonel."

"Tell me! Tell me in a word, who, and what you are? You know me too well."

A slight smile played for a moment over the face of the new-comer, and he said, gently:

"The door is not close shut."

"Ah!"

"Allow me."

He went and carefully closed the door, and then turning to Colonel Blanchard, he folded his arms across his breast, and regarded him in silence. Colonel Blanchard opened and shut his hands nervously, and stamped on the floor, as he said:

"Tell me now once, and for all, what is to be the end of all this? Speak—speak!"

"What has happened?"

The visitor spoke quite calmly: He was a young man of handsome figure and face, and dressed in the uniform of an ensign of the Guard. His age might be about eight-and-twenty, and his form was one that combined the highest amount of elegance, with an evident power and strength, that few men, even in the middle of life possessed. The broad shoulders—the deep chest—the well-set neck—the long, muscular arms, all betokened an athlete.

This was Harold Blanchard—Ensign Harold Blanchard, as he was in rank—of his majesty's Coldstream Guards, and cousin—as it was believed—to Colonel Blanchard.

"Well?" said Harold, after a pause, "What has happened, cousin?"

"Oh! that farce!"

"Farce? What farce?"

"Cousin!—cousin! Sir, I know you not."

"Indeed I see that you are decomposed."

"And well I may be. Who, and what you are, sir, I know not, since our acquaintance is but of six weeks' standing."

"Ah!"

"And began in such folly—such misery!"

Harold stepped close up to the colonel, and looking him close in the face, said:

"Have they found the body?"

"Good God, no!"

"Oh!"

The colonel staggered back into a chair, and groaned aloud:

"I think so long as the body is not found that you are safe enough," added Harold, and if a few weeks more should elapse, it will be so far decomposed as to render identification all but impossible."

"Oh! if I were but dead!"

"Dead? Why my dear friend you would be as bad off as Captain Beauchamp then. But cheer up. This is but a probation. The time will come when I myself will step forward, and proclaim your innocence."

"Now—oh, now!"

"No. It would not do: neither you nor I would be believed now; but the time will come when what I say I believe will be sufficient!"

"You terrify me!"

"I do not wish to do so. You can serve me, and in time I will serve you. But what is it that specially raised this storm in your imagination?"

"Charles Beauchamp, the twin brother of Captain Beauchamp, has been here. He says that I was seen at one o'clock in the morning in St. James' Square, with his brother. You know that it is true."

"Some meddling fool has seen you. What further says this young man?"

"On my denial, he insults me, and challenges me."

"And you will have to fight him?"

"I shall, and perhaps add another crime to my soul, and yet I did not kill Captain Beauchamp."

"You did; but you mean to say you did not murder him."

"Indeed I did not."

"Certainly not. You and he were engaged at the hazard-table, at the old Tennis Court in the Haymarket. He won of you a paltry thousand pounds, and you gave him your acknowledgment on a leaf of your pocket-book for the money. He had drunk deeply, and was touchy and quarrelsome. You both left the gaming-house together; and in St. James' Square he assailed you, saying, that he would go home with you, there and then, and have his money?"

He did—he did!"

"Finally, he struck you: you had no sword, but he had his; and in a struggle you got possession of it, and in his blind fury he ran upon it, and was killed."

"It was so! Alas—alas!"

"At that moment I came up and advised you."

"Fatal advice!"

"I advised you to say nothing about it, but to get rid of the body, and let it be believed that Captain Beauchamp had mysteriously disappeared: and I it was who climbed the railings of the Square garden, and placed the body in a little garden tool-house within the inclosure."

"It was all so."

"I saved you then from the reproach of that man's death; for everybody would have said that you killed him because he had won of you a thousand pounds. Your reputation would have been blasted—your good name gone, and all your hopes of future fortune and advancement demolished."

Colonel Blanchard moved his hands in a despairing way.

"But now all you will have to do will be, just to let blood a little from this twin brother, and you will silence him; for after fighting you, his lips are closed."

"I will let him kill me."

"That would be foolish."

"At least I should be clear from you."

"From me?"

"Yes. Who and what you are, I know not; but I do know that, by your possession of this fearful secret, you have compelled me to become your slave."

"You rave, colonel."

"What! Have I not said you were my cousin? Have I not got you an ensigncy in the Guard? Do I not come to you whenever you send for me? Did I not, early this morning, at Kew, so manage and manoeuvre, according to your orders, that the king was left alone in the plantation; and I know not, even now, what has happened to him—for I came to town at once."

"Be easy: nothing has happened to him. He is well as ever; although, possibly not with quite so royally good an appetite, because some food for meditation has been given him."

"Who, in the name of Heaven! and what are you?" cried the colonel, as he dashed his hand on to the table.

"Hush!"

"Eh?"

"The door. Some one knocks."

CHAPTER VII.

THE RING IN HYDE PARK.

In answer to the colonel's "come in!" the orderly sergeant again presented himself, saying, sharply:

"Major O'Balriggin, sir."

"Major who?"

"O'Balriggin, Colonel Blanchard," said a tall man, in an undress military coat, and a profusion of gray hair and whiskers. "Major O'Balriggin, unattached. The top of the morning to you, colonel; and it's mighty plased I am to see you. Sir, I'm your humble sarvant—to Ensign Harold. Bedad, thin, colonel, I had an idea, sir, that I was in luck this morning; for I put on my right-hand glove, sir, half the way on my left hand, sir—and when the O'Balriggins do that, sir, it manes something."

"Pray, sir, what do you want with me?"

"What do I want with you, colonel? Whiff! Hoo! It's mighty aisy to guess what Major O'Balriggin ever wants with a gentleman he don't know."

"Well, sir, what is it?"

"And it's after asking what is, you are? You are there, are you, colonel? and mighty innocent you look. Whist! Get rid of the sub. Whist! Take it?"

"Oh, the girls of Kilare,

They are young, they are fair."

The top of the morning to you, ensign, and shall I open the door for you, sir, if you please?"

The major had insinuated into the hands of the colonel a note, which a hasty glance at let him see was a challenge from Charles Beauchamp, and naming the major as his friend for the occasion.

"Very well, sir," said Colonel Blanchard, rising. "I am quite sure that Mr. Harold, my cousin, will act for me with pleasure, and therefore I leave you together."

The colonel left the room.

"By my great ancestor, Brian Boroo," said the major, "and that's mighty cool, any way. Sir, I have the honor to hope you know Major O'Balriggin, sir."

"I have heard of you, major."

"To be sure, sir—to be sure; and I think if the colonel had only said: 'Gentlemen, are you thirsty?' before he left the room, it would have had a mighty gentale sound with it."

"Well, major, let us to business."

"Business? Is it business you call it? It's pure pleasure, sir, I'm after thinking."

"That is a matter of taste, sir."

"It's not a taste of anything I've had this morning, I can assure you, Mr. Harold; but the long and the short of it is, that Mr. Charles Beauchamp wants satisfaction, sir, of the colonel."

"For what?"

"Bedad, thin, I forgot to ask him that."

"Must there, then, be a duel?"

"Must there? I should say, yes; for after calling me in, I fight my principal, always, if he backs out, you see, sir."

"Very well, major, what do you propose?"

"The ring, sir."

"Agreed."

"Swords."

"Agreed."

"Six o'clock to-morrow morning."

"Agreed."

"Give me your hand, young man. Bedad, then, and it's a rare elegant youth you are; and if ever you want a friend, rely upon old Major O'Balriggin. It's a pleasure to meet with you, sir. Are you thirsty?"

"Not the least."

"It's the only fault you have, then. Good day to you, sir; and it's first on the field we shall be."

"We shall see. Good morning to you, major."

The major left the room, humming an Irish ditty; and Harold called to the colonel, who was in the adjoining apartment, and who could have had no difficulty in hearing all that had passed on the subject of the duel.

"You have heard?" said Harold.

"I have; but I cannot kill that young man."

"There is no occasion—only you must not let him kill you. I fancy you are master of the sword?"

"Tolerably so."

"There is a peculiar guard which is hardly known in England, which I could show you, and which, if followed up at the moment by an assault, places your opponent at your mercy for a space in which you may count eight, if he be a good swordsman, and ten, if a bad one."

"No, no. I will go as I am, and I care not for the result."

The young ensign looked at Colonel Blanchard with a certain expression of mournful compassion.

"Be assured," he said, "that if the time should come that I can make all this up to you, and relieve you from the load of misery that seems now to weigh you down, it shall be done: and you will no longer think me the Mephistopheles of your existence. I have objects."

"Are they honest?"

"As the daylight."

"I will hope so—I will hope so. Do not fail me at six to-morrow; for I must meet this young man, come of it what may."

"I will be with you in good time, colonel. Keep a stout heart, and believe yet that all will be well. Till to-morrow, adieu!"

"Farewell! farewell!"

Ensign Harold Blanchard, as he was called, passed out of the apartments of the colonel, and through the guard-room, in which a couple of officers were playing at chess.

"Halloa, Harold!" cried one, "am I right or wrong?"

"About what?"

"That old fire-eating Major O'Balriggin. Is it possible he could call on a man without bringing him a challenge?"

"Excuse me," said Harold.

"That is an answer. Good-morning."

Harold passed on. The sentry brought his musket to "attention." The young subaltern slightly touched his hat, and then strolled out into St. James' street. He took his way about half way up the street on the left-hand side of the way, and then dived down a narrow half court half street that was there. Another moment, and he had pushed a door open, and was in a perfectly dark passage.

The door swung shut behind him.

In another quarter of an hour, there emerged into the narrow street, by the same doorway, a quiet-looking man, dressed as a superior tradesman, and apparently about the middle of life. He walked sedately to a livery stable in Piccadilly, and entering the yard, he said, in a somewhat stately tone:

"I want my horse. Mr. Sadgroves' horse."

"The black horse, sir?"

"Yes."

"All right, sir. Hey, Jem! Mr. Sadgrove's horse."

Mr. Sadgrove loitered at the entrance of the inn-yard till a beautiful black charger was brought out to him, on which he carefully and slowly, as a middle-aged gentleman might, mounted.

"What is that you were telling me, James," he said, "about some highwayman on the Richmond Road?"

"Lord bless you! yes, sir—the Owlet. Why, sir, only last night, Sir Francis Double-day's carriage was stopped on the common."

"The common?"

"Barnes' Common, sir; and he was robbed of more than seven hundred pounds."

"Indeed."

"Yes, sir; and if you go that way, I would advise you to take nothing with you."

"But that might provoke this highwayman, or Owlet as you call him, and bring danger on me."

"Well, sir, so it might, and I don't know very well what to advise."

"That is just my opinion, James. Good-day. Here is your money."

"He's a funny gentleman," said the hostler, looking after Mr. Sadgrove; "and though he has put up his horse here for more than a year, I don't know a bit more of who or what he is now than I did the first day. But he pays like a king—that he does."

Mr. Sadgrove rode toward Kensington, and when he got fairly out of London, he reined in his horse, and patted it on the neck, as he said.

"So Leo—so here we are again, safe and sound, my brave Leo."

The horse appeared to comprehend him; for it arched its neck, and made a grateful sort of sound.

"Well, Leo, you shall see a coronation, I hope, some day, old friend—if all things go well. The Owlet may vanish from the scene, and the young subaltern, Harold Blanchard, may disappear, and Mr. Sadgrove may be known no more; but a new king to England may claim the allegiance of a nation."

Now if any one had heard these words, they must have been struck with the likeness of the voice to that of Ensign Harold; and, in fact, on that black horse—of such symmetry and blood that it was the admiration of all who saw it—sat none other than the much-dreaded highwayman, the Owlet, who had the address to become an ensign in the king's Guards, and to baffle, as yet, all pursuit and all inquiry.

He had said he had objects. What they were, a perusal of this narrative will shortly disclose. They were as strange as they were—in his mind—legitimate.

He then rode on at an easy pace, and passed through the old village or town of Hammer-smith, and took a narrow road, which led him toward the old wooden bridge at Fulham.

By this bridge he crossed the Thames, and riding down a country lane—the tall trees on either side of which made it dark and obscure even at mid-day—he paused at a small hut that could hardly be perceived amid the dense foliage which surrounded it on all sides.

The Owlet then—for we may as well call him by that name, since he is under the greenwood tree—blew a quavering note on a silver whistle, and then there was a movement among the bushes, and a man appeared.

"Captain, is that you?"

"It is. Is all still?"

"Not a mouse stirring."

"It is well. Take Leo, and let him be ready for me here, at sunset."

"Ay, ay, captain. Then is the time for us."

"Silence!"

The man said not another word, and the Owlet parted the long branches of what seemed an impenetrable bush, to the right and to the left, and found within it a narrow path, on which he entered. The bush then closed up behind him, and he was lost to sight.

And what was his most gracious majesty King George the Third doing now? and how did he escape from the folds of the Owlet's cloak?

And what was said by my lords Seaford and Hamilton, and by her gracious majesty Queen Charlotte, when she heard of the terrible adventure?

Simply nothing.

His most gracious majesty King George the Third thought it better to keep the whole matter to himself, and said not one word about it. He had emerged from the cloak after a time, when he heard all still about him, and had made his way into the palace by a private door, of which he had the key.

But he missed the broiled trout.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE YOUNG LOVERS.

We return to those young hearts, which, from a depth of despair from which they would have themselves said there was no redemption, were lifted up to a heaven of joy.

Gerald Alton and Alice Home.

Oh, what sunlight was in his eyes, as he tremblingly held in his the hands of Alice, and looked into her eyes, as—half-doubting if she had not actually passed the dim portal of the grave—she sat opposite to him in the coach, which rapidly conveyed them both from the terrible scene which had been enacted around them at Tyburn.

The swoon which had come over Alice

when first the word "reprieve" struck upon her senses, had not lasted long.

Joy soon brings, to counteract whatever apparently disastrous effects it may have, its own antidotes.

And so Alice opened her eyes and looked at Gerald, who, with so much ecstasy of affection, was gazing at her with all his soul in the fixed attention with which he regarded her.

And when he saw those gentle eyes once more, with the light of life in their pure depths, he uttered a cry of such joy—such rapture, that Alice could not but echo it.

The third person in the coach—the king's messenger, as he called himself—shrank back, for he felt that there was something sacred in the affection of those two young hearts; and but that at that moment he must, by any further action indicative of his presence, have introduced disturbing elements in their hearts, he would have stopped the coach and left it.

But they forgot him. They did not see him. If all the world had been gazers upon their looks and acts, and listeners to their words, they would have forgotten that they lived under such observation; and all in all to each other, they would have looked into each other's eyes, and found there the only world they cared to remember.

Then, for a moment, Alice seemed to think that she was no longer an inhabitant of this earth, and that Gerald had followed her to the grave.

"Ah, Gerald!" she said, "why did you not stay?"

"Alice! Alice! My Alice!" was all he could reply to her.

And they clasped each other's hands, and with looks of ineffable affection they regarded each other in silence for a time.

The coach rumbled on; and the narrow, dark street in which they were, sent its various shadows and its various noises into the vehicle, so that those two enraptured and romantic young souls were likely soon to be recalled to the fact that they were still in the midst of the busy, every-day world they had been accustomed to see about them.

The king's messenger was the first to break the silence.

"Let me explain to you both," he said "what it is necessary you should know."

At the sound of his voice, it seemed as if they had just become cognizant of his presence, and they turned to him with looks of surprise.

"Calm yourself, Gerald Alton," he added, "and you too, Alice Home. All is real about you; and in me you see the man who was well-pleased to be the means of bringing the pardon from the king."

These words, plain and simple as they were, at once stripped from before all the circumstances that had occurred the veil of doubt and uncertainty; and they both understood the true position of affairs.

"Ah, sir," cried Gerald, as he seized the hand of the stranger, "how can I live long enough to thank you, and to show you how grateful I would fain be?"

"And I—and I," said Alice. "You have snatched me from a terrible death."

"I will not commit the affectation," said the stranger, "of attempting to deny it. Had I not reached Tyburn in time, you would have fallen a victim to the severity of the criminal code of this country, which has the same punishment for a petty larceny as for a hideous murder."

"But, sir," added Alice, "sir, you must know that I am innocent."

"That I can well believe. A judicial murder is not so rare a thing that one need doubt it."

The coach stopped.

The sudden cessation of the wheezing, and rumbling, and swaying from side to side of the vehicle, produced a certain amount of alarm in the heart of Alice; and she held the hands of Gerald still tighter, as she said, faintly:

"There is no danger? O Gerald! Gerald! if even yet—"

"Be calm," said the stranger; "all is well."

"Yes, sir; I will trust to you."

The coachman had dismounted from his box; and then the king's messenger hastily alighted—that is to say, quietly rather than hastily; for there was a calm kind of dignity in all his actions, which stripped them of any appearance of haste or precipitation.

Some few words passed between him and

the coachman, and then he held the door of the vehicle open, as he said, in the soft, gentle voice which seemed to be natural to him, when he made no effort to assume a different tone:

"Alight here, and fear nothing."

They were in another moment by the side of the stranger, on the narrow pavement of a small street, which appeared to contain but few open houses or entrances to houses, but which seemed to be bounded on each side by the walls of tall buildings, and the palings and brick divisions of yards and gardens.

The coach rumbled off.

"Now, follow me, and fear nothing," said the stranger.

"We will follow you, sir," said Gerald. "Take us where you will; we follow you with every confidence."

"Yes, Gerald," said Alice, "that is right."

Gerald had not the most distant idea in regard to what part of London they were in. So entirely absorbed had he been, while in the coach, by a contemplation of Alice, that he had taken no note whatever of the route by which they had proceeded from Tyburn.

And in London there were so many dull, dingy, narrow, old streets, exactly of the pattern of the one they were in, that there was nothing by which he could particularly identify it.

To be sure, on casting his eyes to the corner, when he reached there, he saw the half-obliterated name posted up:

"King Street."

That was the name of the street then; but as in London there were then about three hundred King streets (and about five hundred now), such a name by no means localized the spot.

With Alice's arm closely clasped under his own, Gerald followed the stranger.

"Dear Alice," he said, "how different is the present hour to those dreadful ones—"

Alice burst into tears, and Gerald paused.

"Dear one, I have pained you."

"O Gerald! Gerald! my heart is so weak—I have suffered so much."

"I blame myself, my Alice. It is not I who should revert to the past, or recall to your mind the horrors we have both gone through."

"We must strive to forget them, Gerald."

"Yes, dearest—yes."

"And yet, how wrong, how wicked it would be, if I were to forget all your devotion and all your love, Gerald! Can I forget how you followed me to seeming death? How you would have died for me, if they would but have let you do so? O Gerald! Gerald! I did not know that you could love me as you did."

"As I do, dear Alice."

"Yes, Gerald, as you do; and I will never, never forget."

Gerald pressed one of her hands in his, as he then said, falteringly:

"And, Alice dear, will you likewise recollect that—that—"

"What, Gerald?"

"That you said—that is, that when you thought our last words were being spoken—that you then said you would have no reserves, and that you would tell me truly from your heart that you loved me."

"Yes, Gerald," replied Alice, faintly.

"Do you recall that confidence?"

"No; no."

"O Alice—my own dear Alice!"

"I will recall no word of truth or affection, Gerald. I have said that I love you, and I may not gainsay it now."

"Alice! My Alice! What king—what emperor so proud and so happy as I? Alice! my Alice! Gift of Heaven! I will love you so dearly that the life we shall pass together shall seem but the sunny lapse of one long summer's day. Who is it that has said man might be so happy if he would? That his only care should be the season's difference? My Alice! we shall be happier than that; for all seasons shall be alike to us, be full of the sweet sunshine of our love."

"Gerald Alton!"

Gerald started. The stranger had placed his hand upon the shoulder of the young man; but it was not harshly. There was a gentle smile upon his face.

"Come," he said, "follow me still; but no longer in the open streets. This way."

The stranger had opened a small, common,

wooden door, in what looked like the wall of some garden or stable, and he stood aside for them to pass through before him.

"Come, dear one," whispered Gerald.

They passed through the small door. The stranger followed them, and carefully closed it behind him. At a distance of about six paces there was another door, which the stranger warned them of, saying:

"Do not advance in the darkness. Let me pass you."

They paused; and, hand in hand, they would have been well content there to pause for any length of time; but they heard the sound of a key turning in a lock, and then there was the creaking of what seemed to be a heavy door upon its hinges, and there came a faint beam of light from the other side of it.

"Now go on," said the stranger. "All is well. You are safe."

"And, sir," said Gerald, "were we not safe?"

"I will tell you of that shortly."

The second door that the messenger had opened was of iron; and as he closed it, they could see by the light of a lamp that was in a niche in the wall above it, that it was elaborately fastened.

They were in a narrow passage, the flooring of which was thickly carpeted, and the walls of which were covered with a sort of felt, which must have had the effect of most completely deadening any noises that might take place within the mysterious passage.

"Let me precede you," said the stranger. "There are other doors to open, of which I have the keys."

He passed Gerald and Alice, and soon they all reached some stairs, up which they ascended; and Gerald, as he did so, counted thirty-seven steps. He counted them rather mechanically than with any object in so doing.

At the top of these steps there appeared a door that was covered with green velvet; and above that door, on a bracket, was another lamp.

Then the stranger placed a key in the lock of this green velvet covered door, and opened it.

"Come in, and welcome," he said.

There was a sudden transition to the eyes, from the dim, artificial light of the gloomy passage, and the staircase, to the light of day, for at a distance of about two feet from the door with the green velvet covering, another door stood open, that led into a spacious apartment, the windows of which communicated with the open daylight.

But still the light was of a subdued quality, and only at the moment appeared bright and white to Alice and Gerald, because they had it to contrast with the dim radiance of the lamps in the dark passage.

The apartment in which they found themselves was of large extent—some thirty-five feet in length and about twenty-four in width. Three tall windows faced them, and they could see the boughs of trees—on which the greater part of the leaves still lingered—close, apparently, to the panes of glass.

The room was rather meretriciously furnished. It was a blaze of crimson and gold.

Crimson silk hangings—a crimson velvet carpet—and gold everywhere—on the ceiling—on the mouldings—and, in fact, wherever it could be at all placed to aid the general effect—which was that of the heavily-magnificent.

Alice was dazzled.

Gerald, too, looked about him in some sort of amazement, as he said:

"Where are we? Is this a palace?"

"Yes," said the stranger. "A palace is the abode of a king, is it not?"

"The king's palace?" cried Gerald. "Then the pardon—"

Gerald scarcely knew what he was saying. Some confusedly romantic ideas began to take possession of him—that the king had not only sent a pardon to Alice; but that he was intent upon making her some amends for all the suffering she had gone through.

Here the stranger smiled as he said:

"We will not talk of that just at present. It will be necessary now that I should know what are your wishes, and what are your resolves. Sit you down, Alice Home, and you too, Gerald Alton."

"Yes," said Gerald, faintly.

He turned very pale, and then the stranger said, suddenly.

"I had well nigh forgotten. We must not neglect the wants of Nature."

He clapped his hands together twice, and on the instant a tall, narrow door opened, and a slim, pale, young man appeared, and bowed profoundly and respectfully.

"Some refreshments for these friends of mine."

The pale, slim young man bowed again; but not a word he spoke. He retired at once; and in the course of a few minutes returned with a tray of silver, on which were sweetmeats, biscuits, small confectionery, and a crystal goblet, together with smaller glasses. This tray and its contents the servitor placed, with an appearance of great respect, on a table.

The stranger, who was attended upon with so much ceremony, made a slight sign, and the young man disappeared through the tall, narrow doorway, and softly closed the door behind him.

"Now," said the stranger, "you will be all the better for some refreshment. The soul will fight long and help the body, but faintness will come."

Both Alice and Gerald were in truth much in want of some sustenance, and they were grateful for the new life that seemed to be given to them by the fine, light Spanish wine, that was in the crystal goblet.

The color came back to the cheeks of Gerald, and he looked in the face of Alice with a world of love, as he said:

"Ah, my Alice, I never thought to taste morsel more in this world."

"It is like a dream," said Alice.

The stranger smiled, and in the rich soft voice that was peculiar to him, he said:

"We are such things as dreams are made of."

"But all this is not?" said Gerald.

He glanced around him as he spoke; and then he was somewhat surprised that he could not see the door by which they had entered that costly apartment, with all its gilding, and all its elegance and riches.

"Listen to me for a moment," said the stranger. "It is true that you have been rescued from death, Alice; but the king did not willingly grant the pardon which I exhibited to the sheriff; nor was it in such regular form that, under any other circumstances than the confusion of the moment, it would have been received."

Gerald looked alarmed, and flung an arm round Alice, as he cried:

"Danger still—more peril!"

"I did not say that there was peril; I am but explaining facts to you, and pointing out possible contingencies; and what I want you both to do now is, to tell me, in brief, your position in life, and who and what you are."

"Ah, sir! have you thus befriended us, and do not know?" said Alice.

"Perhaps what I know is sufficient," said the stranger. "I would rather hear from your own lips the real facts. What is your story, Alice Home?"

"A short one, indeed, sir, with but one mystery in it!"

"Ah! a mystery."

"Yes, I was the only care, and apparently the only joy of one whom I thought my mother; but on her death-bed, she, with many tears, told me she did not bear that relation to me; but that in a small leathern valise, which was hidden in a dry well at Corfe Castle, in Dorsetshire, I should find full particulars of my history. She had me carefully educated; and, at her death, finding myself alone in the world, and with but scanty means, I began to try to eke out a subsistence by teaching, and was recommended to Mr. Ambrose, the jeweler, on Ludgate Hill, to be governess to his two children. While there, I was accused of stealing the diamond bracelet."

"And that is all?"

"Yes, sir, that is all!"

"Did you ever go in search of the valise your mother had mentioned?"

"Alas! no! I have had no means to travel; and, indeed, I thought it but the ravings of a disturbed imagination until to-day."

"And what to-day gave it the semblance of reality?"

"It was very strange; but a man who was in command of the constables who rode by the cart that was conveying me to Tyburn, told me, that if I would say where the valise was that had been mentioned by my mother on her death-bed, I should be saved."

"You refused?"

"At first; but the love of life, and—"

Alice glanced at Gerald.

The stranger smiled.

"I understand—go on."

"I told him. But then he only mocked me; and I found that I was deceived."

"The villain, Jonas Brand?"

"Yes—yes; that is his name."

The stranger rose and paced the room twice. Then he went to a small cabinet that was between two of the windows, and wrote something on a slip of paper. He touched a spring, and a slight sound, as of a distant bell, came upon the still air of the room.

Then the tall, narrow door in one of the panels opened, and the servitor appeared.

The stranger handed him the slip of paper; and when he had gone, which he did without a word, after a low bow, the stranger, with a smile, sat down again, and said, quietly:

"Now, Gerald Alton, your story."

"Ah, sir! I have none to tell. My father was a poor gentleman, who had served in the wars; and when he died, he left me nothing but his name, and a letter of introduction to Mr. Ambrose, the jeweler—who, it appeared, had married some distant relation of his wife's, my poor mother. The introduction and the relationship were both very slight; but Mr. Ambrose made me his apprentice without a fee."

"That is all?"

"Yes. But then I saw Alice."

"Where she came to teach?"

"Yes, sir."

"Now, Gerald, tell me: Was there any visitor of Mr. Ambrose's of rank, who seemed over-intimate with him?"

"None but Sir Bernfide Esperance."

The stranger nodded.

"That will do," he said; "that will do. Now, I must leave you both very soon; but before I go, having heard your simple histories, I will tell you what you must both do in the time to come."

They both looked in the face of this man, who seemed to speak as though he was the arbiter of their fate, with curiosity and surprise.

"You, Gerald Alton, no longer wish to go back to the workshop of Mr. Ambrose?"

"Anything but that."

"And you, Alice, no longer wish to expose yourself to the serious chances of the pardon I brought to the sheriff being questioned?"

"O Heaven!"

"They shall not—they dare not!" cried Gerald, as he sprung to his feet.

"They might, but we will foil them. You are now in a house, which has been supposed to be shut up for some years, in St. James' square. Those trees that you see are in its back-yard or garden. Now, you will marry, and I will give you this house to live in."

"Sir?"

"Sir?"

"You both look surprised. You love each other? Well, you are both young, but I approve of early marriages. I will allow you a sufficient income with which to keep a quiet and fair establishment; and the only recompense I ask of you is, that you will inhabit the front of the house, and keep it like other houses; but never interfere with the back, and with a suite of rooms which are built out into the garden, of which this is one."

Alice and Gerald looked at each other in surprise.

"Do you hesitate?"

"Oh, no—no!"

"You accept, then?"

"Best of friends!" said Gerald. "How can we do otherwise? But such happiness!"

"Such mystery!" said Alice.

The stranger smiled.

"Now, you must excuse me," he said, "for have work to do. Gerald, you will find books with which to while away the time here, no doubt. Through this door is a passage leading to other apartments. If anything is wanted, you have but to touch this spring, and a bell will sound, which will be answered."

"Sir—sir?" said Alice.

She rose and held the stranger by the arm.

"Sir, I do love Gerald!"

"Well."

"But—but—"

"What would you say?"

"Until I am his—until we are married."

"Ah! I understand you. Let me think. Can you bear the solitary confinement of these rooms for some hours?"

"Oh, yes—yes!"

"Then, Gerald, come with me."

"Dear Alice, adieu!"

"I am right, Gerald?"

"Ever right, dear one!"

"Come, Gerald," added the stranger; "I am pressed for time—you will soon meet again. Come."

For one moment Gerald held Alice's two hands in his. Then he drew her gently toward him, and for another moment he clasped her to his heart.

"I am ready, sir," he then said. "Pray, pardon me."

"There is nothing to pardon. Follow me."

CHAPTER IX.

GERALD CALLS ON HIS OLD MASTER.

The more Gerald Alton thought of the singular events of the last six hours of his life, the more he began to doubt their reality.

That he who, at eight o'clock that morning, should be, with despair at his heart, beating his hands to pieces on the iron wicket of Newgate, and now at ten promised immediate marriage with the object of his heart's best love, and a splendid house to reside in, and a competent income, seemed to him all so vague and void, that when he stood in the little, narrow, gloomy street again with the king's messenger, he began to think it all a dream.

"No—no," he said. "It cannot be!"

"What cannot be, Gerald Alton?"

"All that has happened, and all that is happening. I shall awaken soon."

"You think it a vision?"

"Of sleep? Yes."

"It is real; and now what I have to say to you is simply this: I have business to do, and will need you here again at sunset on this spot."

"That will be six o'clock about?"

"Yes, we will say six o'clock. I will bring with me a clergyman—who, armed with authority from the archbishop, will perform the marriage ceremony between you and Alice."

"Nay, sir; that can hardly be."

"The Catholic archbishop, I mean. Surely, it cannot matter to you, if you be married, whether it be a Roman Catholic priest or a Protestant clergyman who unites you."

Gerald looked grave.

"Each," he said, "is the minister of God, no doubt; but yet, dear as Alice is to me, and much as I would wish to call her mine, I would not propose to her such a thing."

"What would you propose then?"

"That I get a regular license, and that we be married, then, by a Protestant clergyman."

"So be it. There is money. Only of one thing let me warn you. Alice may be named rightly, so far as her Christian name is concerned; but her other name is not Home."

"Indeed, sir!"

"The fact. You can avoid all risk of discovery by giving her any name you like."

"But would that be valid?"

"Quite. Pho—pho! You are full of scruples. Call her Alice Morton."

"Morton?"

"Yes. It is as good a name as Home."

"But—"

"But again? O Gerald, man of many scruples? Will you take my word now, that her real name is Morton?"

"I will take your word, sir, for anything."

"Then with it take this purse, and meet me here at six without fail."

The mysterious stranger then walked away, leaving Gerald standing lost in amazement and indecision in the little narrow street, that now, of course, he knew was at the back of St. James' square—but that was all.

But Gerald would have been still more surprised and bewildered, could he have watched the proceedings of the mysterious man who had befriended him and Alice so effectually.

Gerald would have seen that that man made his way to a small hair-dresser's shop in the vicinity of the Haymarket, and that, merely giving a careless nod to the master of the shop, he walked through it, and opening a door at its farther end, went up stairs to the upper part of the house.

He would then have seen, that in about ten minutes there came down again, and passed through the shop, with a similar careless nod, a young man dressed in the uniform of the

Guards, and that that young man, with a calm and sauntering step, took his way toward St. James' Palace.

But all this Gerald Alton did not see—and it was as well that he did not; for he had quite enough of the strange and the incongruous to fill up his head and brain, without any additions thereto.

Upon glancing at the contents of the purse which the stranger had given him, Gerald, at a moderate computation, saw that there were about fifty guineas in it.

And now a new and terrible fear came over the head of the young man.

"What is it that this man," he said to himself, "will require further to be done in payment for all this liberality? In what dark intrigue, or in what amount of criminality are we to be involved, perhaps beyond all extrication, as payment to him for what he has done, and for what he yet promises to do?"

These were questions as pertinent as they were embarrassing; and poor Gerald felt half inclined to go back to Alice; and, placing her arm beneath his, urge her to fly with him at once from that gold and crimson room, and welcome any amount of poverty, rather than encounter the possible evils that his imagination began to picture.

But, then, before he could take two steps toward carrying out this idea, he thought of the kindly looks of the stranger—of his soft and gentle tones, and he asked himself: "Where! oh! where would Alice have been, long ere this time, but for him? With the dead! With the dead! Ah! no, I will not—I cannot doubt him."

Then Gerald made his way down the narrow street, and he found that, on passing out through an archway, and traversing another street, he was in a third thoroughfare, which conducted directly into St. James' square.

Then Gerald knew where he was.

"Well," he said, "Alice has given a tacit consent to this hasty union. Be it so. I will to the city, and procure the necessary license—which I know is but a matter of form and fees—and then I will go to Mr. Ambrose's, and bring away from my attic, in which I used to sleep, such things as belong to me, and bid adieu to my former mode and way of life forever."

Full, then, of these ideas, and much refreshed by the light repast he had had at the mysterious stranger's house, Gerald made his way to that well-known matrimonial mart which lies to the southward of old St. Paul's Cathedral—a nest of legal spiders which has only even now been but very partially disturbed; and there, for a sum of about eighteen pounds, Gerald, after various ceremonies, purchased a license under the hand of His Grace, the Primate of England, empowering any ordained priest of the Anglican Church to marry "his well-beloved Gerald Alton" to Alice Morton.

This special license enabled the marriage-ceremony to be performed anywhere; and so different from the ordinary license, by which it is compulsory that the ceremony should be performed in a consecrated church.

Gerald then directed his steps toward Ludgate Hill, the residence of his master, Mr. Ambrose, the jeweler and goldsmith.

In a narrow court, adjoining to Mr. Ambrose's shop, there was an entrance used by the workmen; and a door with a swinging weight and pulley led to a staircase, at the top of which was another door, to which the six workmen employed by Mr. Ambrose had each a key.

This upper door led into the workshop.

Through the workshop there appeared another door, which communicated with the house; and as it was now twelve o'clock, the workmen had gone to their dinner, and the workshop was deserted.

With some doubt if he had it, Gerald felt for his key; for he, too, had one to the workshop—and he was pleased to find it.

"What need I," he said to himself, "see Mr. Ambrose at all? He has not been over-kind to me: he persecuted Alice. I do not wish to look upon his face again. I will make my way silently and softly to the attic in which they have given me grudgingly a bed—which I have always had to make for myself—and I will just take my own things and my father's picture, and descend again; and they shall never see me more if I can help it."

Full of this idea, Gerald pulled the door with the swinging weight open, and ran up the staircase. He unlocked the door of the workshop, and let it swing shut and fasten itself—which it did so soon as he let it go.

The workshop was empty.

"That is well," he said. "They are all at dinner. I expected so; and I shall have ample time, and shall not require to give any troublesome explanations to any one."

Gerald was passing rapidly through the workshop, when his attention was directed to something glittering upon one of the work-tables.

"What have we here?" he said. "Why, this is the very bracelet that poor Alice was accused of stealing, and which they said she had secreted in her music-roll. Why is it here, I wonder; for it was uninjured when produced at her trial. I suppose Mr. Ambrose don't like the looks of it now, and means to alter the setting. O hateful bracelet! you shine and glitter, and send forth beautiful rays; but you do not know the mischief you did, nor the tears that were shed on your account! O mischievous bauble, I hate the sight of you!"

As he spoke, Gerald took up the bracelet, and, with the unreflecting passion of his youth, he flung it on to the floor of the workshop violently.

Then something went wrong—or right—about it with a sharp, clicking noise, and Gerald saw that a portion of the gold-setting seemed to have split into two portions; and it was so singular that it should do so, that Gerald lifted the bracelet again from the floor, to examine how or why such an effect had been produced.

Then he saw at once—for he knew sufficient of the trade to see so much—that it was no artificial work that was in the gold setting of the bracelet, but a beautifully-contrived opening, which fitted so closely that the eye would in vain seek to detect it.

Lying within this opening was a narrow strip of paper, which Gerald soon possessed himself of. It was a very thin, white, silvery piece of paper; and on it, in old Italian-looking letters, was written:

"Adela Salisbury, married Oct. 5, 1735 (see cabinet right hand king's own chamber); died August 1, 1736."

"How very odd!" said Gerald. "What can all this mean, I wonder? Well, I won't take the bracelet; but this bit of paper, which is of no value—"

"Ah Gerald! of what value was the bracelet, with all its jewels, compared with that slip of old, thin, flimsy paper, if you had but known it?"

"Of no value at all," added Gerald. "So I will keep it, and show it to our friend, the king's messenger. Pooh! I call him a king's messenger; but that is just because I have no other name to call him. He is—he must be some great lord."

Gerald placed the slip of paper carefully in his pocket, and then leaving the bracelet which he so hated the sight of lying on the floor; and, indeed, giving it a stamp with his heel, which materially damaged it so far as regarded the setting, he passed on, and opened the door which led from the workshop to Mr. Ambrose's private house.

There was a long passage or corridor, the floor of which was covered with green baize. Immediately on the other side of this door, and at the further end of that, was the staircase that led up to the attics.

In fact, this passage had been made between his house and his workshop by Mr. Ambrose, that he might, without the necessity of going out of his shop, and round to the court, visit his workmen, and see what they were about, and give them orders.

Lightly Gerald ran along the passage, and reached the landing of the stairs. One flight went down—the other up. The downward flight led to the first floor, and thence, lower still, to the shop—the upper flight to the attics.

Now Gerald had no intention of pausing one moment when he reached the stairs. His intention was, to go to his attic, possess himself of what was his, and then leave the premises; but, as he reached the landing-place at the end of the baize-covered passage, he heard footsteps and voices.

Gerald paused, and looked over the balustrade.

Two persons were coming up from the shop, and the voices, as they spoke, although the tones were very low, came clearly up the well staircase to Gerald's sense of hearing.

"It is alike perplexing and amazing," said one of the speakers. "To be baffled in this way is beyond conception."

Then Gerald knew that the person who thus spoke was Sir Bernfide Esperance, who was so constant a visitor at the house of the jeweler.

"But," said the other voice, "what is to be done? If the king was moved to pardon her—"

"Pshaw!" said Sir Bernfide Esperance.

Then Gerald knew that it was Mr. Ambrose who was talking to Sir Bernfide Esperance, and the idea crossed his mind, that it could be of no other than Alice they were speaking.

He craned his neck and head over the balustrade; for he did not wish to lose one word of what they were saying on a subject so interesting to him.

"Pshaw!" added Sir Bernfide.

"But facts," said the jeweler—"facts are stubborn things. The sheriff came into my shop only half an hour ago, and said that a king's messenger had ridden from Kew in forty minutes, and killed his horse, to bring the pardon."

"A trick—a trick!"

"A trick, Sir Bernfide? Why, you cannot mean—"

At this moment they had reached the landing-place immediately below that on which Gerald was listening, and the jeweler opened the door of the front room on the first floor, and they both passed in.

The door was allowed to swing close; but Gerald did not hear that it was fastened.

"I must and will hear more of this," cried Gerald, in an agitated whisper, to himself. He struck his breast as he spoke. "I will hear more, at any risk."

Gerald slipped off his shoes, and tripped lightly down the stairs.

CHAPTER X.

THE GUILTY CONFERENCE.

Gerald Alton, without his shoes, did not make the least noise as he descended the staircase at the jeweler's house, in order to gain the landing-place of the first floor, to listen to the conversation between Mr. Ambrose and Sir Bernfide Esperance concerning Alice.

Had the conference of these two men been on any other subject than that one which touched so nearly his heart and his feelings, Gerald would have disdained to play the listener.

But where Alice was concerned—where her interests and her life, perhaps, were at stake, he did not hesitate, but resolved to hear all he could.

The door of the front-room on the first floor had swung close to, within a quarter of an inch. It was a great risk, to stand there and listen to such a man as Sir Bernfide Esperance, for he was known to be cruel and vindictive; but Gerald had no sensation of fear, although he certainly wished to get what information he could, and then escape with it.

He could hear the voices quite plainly.

"I tell you, Ambrose," said Sir Bernfide Esperance, "that there is some mystery in it that I cannot yet fathom, although I will do so yet."

"Well, well," replied Ambrose.

"It is not well. It is anything but well. Why, I tell you, Colonel Blanchard—for what reason I know not—took it on himself to solicit the king for her pardon."

"The pardon of Alice?"

"To be sure; but the king, as usual, was obstinate; and as the way of all others to make him not do a thing is, to ask him to do it, as if you want him to do anything you must advise him not, why, of course, from the moment the colonel spoke, he was resolved to hang the girl."

"And yet—"

"And yet, at the eleventh hour, a horse is killed, to bring a messenger in time with a pardon."

"It's very odd."

"More than odd; and you, Ambrose, have earned your money easily enough."

"My money, Sir Bernfide!"

"Yes; I gave you a thousand pounds."

"Hush, sir—hush!"

"Oh, stuff! you had your reward, and the service has failed. That's the state of things."

"But not—through—me," said Mr. Ambrose, in a faltering tone. "I did all I could."

"Well, well."

"I swore to the bracelet after you had rolled it up in her music, while she was giving a lesson on the map of the world to my little Juliana."

"Villain! O villain!" whispered Gerald, through his clenched teeth. "O Heaven! where is the lightning to strike such a villain?"

"Of course, you swore to the bracelet," said Sir Bernfide Esperance; "of course."

"Well—what more could I do?"

"Nothing—nothing."

"Then, sir—"

"Come, come, don't put on that hang-dog looking face. I don't come here to blame you, Ambrose. I know, and I am quite willing to admit, you did your best; but that best has failed."

"I cannot understand it, Sir Bernfide."

"Nor I. But I will; for I tell you, Ambrose, that while that girl lives I stand upon a mine."

"A mine, sir?"

"Yes; which may explode at any moment, and destroy me, and all my hopes and all my fortunes. I should have to be off at once to the Indies. I say to you, Ambrose, that that girl and I cannot be both above the ground together."

"Well, Sir Bernfide, you have said that before, you know; and, of course, it lets me know that you have some terrible reason for wishing her dead."

"I have, I have."

"Though I don't know what the reason is."

"Would you like to know?"

"Well, I must confess—"

"Ah," thought Gerald, "now I shall hear this terrible secret. Help me, Heaven, that I lose no word of it."

"Oh, you would," added Sir Bernfide Esperance, in a cold, sneering tone.

"If you please; for then, you know, I might be able to be of more use to you."

"Then, Ambrose—ha! ha!—then, Ambrose, there is only one condition."

"A condition?"

"Yes; and that is, that you would have to follow Alice into another world with your knowledge, for I would not endure you in this."

"Bless us and save us all! then I don't want to know anything further about it."

"As it is, you know—almost—too—much."

"I?—I?"

"Yes, you; but one must trust somebody. You say that the sheriff brought you the news?"

"He did, Sir Bernfide; and he was so frightened at the whole affair, that I hardly think he knew what he was saying."

"Like enough. Like enough. It was an awful scene. I left the crowd at the corner of the Oxford Road. Oh! that I had gone on! But I wonder Brand don't come. I told him to be here at a little after twelve."

"It is half-past."

"So—so," thought Gerald, "I must keep one ear on the shop, or I shall have Jonas Brand upon me."

Gerald had scarcely uttered these words in a very low whisper, to himself, when he heard the shop-door swing open below, and a hoarse voice cried out:

"Mr. Ambrose within?"

"Yes, Mr. Brand," said some one; "but he is up-stairs, with Sir Bernfide Esperance."

"Oh, all right; I am expected."

"Expected—"

"Get out of my way, hound, will you!"

Gerald knew perfectly well that a door opened from the shop directly on to the staircase; and that, if he would escape Jonas Brand, who was always quick in his movements, he had not a moment to lose.

Darting up the stairs which he had so recently descended, Gerald lay at full length in the passage above. Then he heard the tramp of Brand's feet.

The door of the first-floor room was opened, and Mr. Ambrose said:

"Who is there? Who is it?"

"I," said Brand.

"Oh! Mr. Brand?"

"To be sure. Is Sir Bernfide here?"

"He is. Come in."

Brand entered the room; but he was more careful than Ambrose or Sir Bernfide Esperance, for he banged the door shut behind him.

"Now I am foiled," said Gerald, wringing his hands. "Now I shall hear nothing."

Nevertheless, although he was afraid that he would not be able to hear what should be said in the room; and which, now that Brand had arrived, would probably be better than ever worth the hearing, Gerald stepped down the stairs again, and reached the door.

He placed his ear close to one of the upper panels, and then he found that it was so indistinctly, and in so fragmental a way that he heard what was said; that it would be impossible to rely upon the exact substance of it.

But he had already acquired sufficient information to know that there was a plot against the life of Alice, and that Mr. Ambrose had been paid a thousand pounds for his part in it; and such knowledge fell like a fire in the brain of the young man, and it required all his reason to prevent him from arming himself with whatever weapons the house could afford him, and rushing into the room with an accusation on his lips, and vengeance in his hands.

Then as he was upon the point of giving up all further attempt to listen, he heard the voice of Sir Bernfide Esperance, raised so high that the words he uttered were as plain and distinct as if the door had been open.

"Jonas Brand," he said, "if you really have any information on which you can rely, you will be well paid for it; but it is of no use speaking to me in mysterious half-sentences."

"I know what I know!" said Brand, in as high a tone as Sir Bernfide's.

"A fool's speech!" cried Sir Bernfide.

"Very well, sir. Then the fool can keep his secret."

"What on earth do you want?" roared Sir Bernfide.

"A thousand pounds!" cried Jonas Brand, at least an octave higher than Sir Bernfide.

"And then you produce the valise?"

"No!"

"What in the name, then, of—"

"No!" roared Brand; "but then I will tell you where it is, or was."

"The man's a fool!"

"Very good!"

Gerald had just time to dart up the staircase, when Jonas Brand, in a towering passion, opened the door, and came out on to the landing.

"The man may be a fool," he said; "but he knows what he knows, and he won't tell it till he is paid. Ha! ha!"

Jonas Brand went clattering down the stairs towards the shop, with his hanger banging upon every step as he went.

Then Sir Bernfide called after him.

"Stop, Brand! stop!"

"What for?"

"I will tell you when I come down, directly. Good-day, Ambrose, I don't blame you. Good-day."

"Good-day, Sir Bernfide."

Sir Bernfide Esperance ran down the stairs; and he and Jonas Brand left the house together.

"Oh! what villainy! what villainy!" said Gerald. "What shall I do? Shall I go and reproach Mr. Ambrose? Oh no, no. He would only raise an outcry; and as I am still his apprentice, he would just have me locked up, and then I should be, perhaps, assassinated by Sir Bernfide Esperance. No! no! I must be quiet; and I will take the advice of our kind friend, the king's messenger."

This was certainly the most sensible determination that Gerald Alton could come to, and he ran up to his own attic, as he had been accustomed to call it, and hastily began to collect together the few things he could really and truly call his own.

This was very easily done; and the articles all went into poor Gerald's pockets. Then he turned from the room which, poor and squalid as it was, he had a certain affection for—the affection of custom.

"Good-bye," he said. "Good-bye."

"Eh?" said a voice.

Gerald started in alarm.

"Who is that?"

"Me!" said the voice.

"Timber?"

"Yes; it's Timber. Who did you say good-bye to, Gerald?"

"Well, I hardly know; but, Timber, come here."

"Yes, Gerald."

Timber was a boy of about ten years of

age. He had been found by the watch one night, when about three days old, it was supposed, among some shavings in a timber-yard, and taken to the work-house.

An imaginative beadle had then thought proper to name him Timber, after the place in which he was found; and in due time he had become errand-boy to Mr. Ambrose, who was one of the church-wardens of the parish, and got him for nothing.

Timber was in that costume so well known in London as belonging to the charity-school.

Yellow leather knee-breeches, very baggy at the knees and behind; ribbed worsted stockings; heavy, ill-made shoes; a cut-away coat of blue serge, with a leaden badge on the breast—which let all the world know that Timber belonged to the Ward of Farringdon without, and was number 82.

A muffin cap, as it was called—which was about the size of the ladies' bonnets of the year of grace 1858—completed the costume of the charity-boy.

"Timber," said Gerald, "sit down."

Timber sat down on an old tea-chest.

"Yes, Gerald."

"Timber, I think you love me."

"Oh don't I neither," said Timber. "You don't kick and cuff a cove—you don't wop a chap as isn't your own size—you don't—"

"That will do, Timber. Now, I am going to trust you."

"Eh!"

"I am going to trust you, Timber."

"Oh!"

Timber thrust his hand deep in his pocket, but there was nothing there. A vague idea seemed to have arisen in his mind that the trust Gerald spoke of must be something connected with money, and that in his complete erudition it must needs be reciprocal.

Timber therefore shook his head.

Gerald smiled; for poor Timber had one of those ingenuous countenances which any one might read.

"I think you mistake me, Timber."

"Oh!" said Timber again.

"When I said I was going to trust you, I meant that I thought you were so much a friend of mine, and so kind-hearted, that if I told you how to do me a service, you would, and that nothing would persuade you to do me an injury."

Timber stepped up close to Gerald, and while a "flash of tears" was in his eyes, he seized Gerald's right hand in both his own, and shook it with a convulsive sort of movement.

Timber had no words just then.

Poor Timber! Not his cruel desertion in the wood-yard—not his stern, cold, rough, and unkind stepmother, the Parish—not the kicks and cuffs, and hard words which the poor and helpless are "to the manner born"—not the sneers and jeers at his "uniform"—not the constant reminder on the part of Mr. Ambrose's servants and workmen, that he was a "charity brat"—not all these things had been sufficient to extinguish, blot out, or even blur over, for one moment, the tender, gentle heart that beat beneath that metal badge of his servitude.

Timber was a gentleman—one of Nature's own gentlemen—if we divide the word, and think and believe, that to be a gentleman is to be gentle; and gentle he was, as any young fawn in a forest glade.

"Yes," said Timber, at last. "Yes, Gerald—dear Gerald; you—you never called me a 'charity-brat.'"

"No, Timber, never. I never thought of doing so."

"You—you never. Well, never mind. If you want me to kill myself, dear Gerald, I will be so glad."

"Not at all, Timber. But what I want to say to you is this—I am going away."

"Yes."

"I shall not be here ever again, I fancy."

"Yes. That is no, dear Gerald."

"I am going because of poor Miss Alice."

"Bless her!"

"Amen to that dear prayer, Timber."

"She didn't do it, Gerald, she could not do it. I was in the shop. I was cleaning the show-case when that bad man, Sir Bernfide Esperance, came out of the counting-house with Mr. Ambrose; and I saw him pluck Mr. Ambrose by the coat, and I heard him say: 'Now—now!'"

"Indeed, Timber?"

"Yes! and then the poor young thing,

with her roll of music in her hand, was stopped at the door by Mr. Ambrose; and his lips were white, and his eyes were all ways at once, and his knees shook, and his hair seemed to move on his head, as he said: 'Miss Home,' says he, 'Miss Home, I'm afraid,' says he, 'you have something that don't belong to you in your roll of music,' says he."

"You saw all that, Timber?"

"I did—I did. Then she turned round and she looked at him; and when he was forced to look into her eyes, he stepped back so suddenly that he broke one of the panes of glass in the show-case, and Sir Bernfide Esperance went and shut himself up in the counting-house; and then I saw blood on Mr. Ambrose's lip."

"Blood?"

"Yes; he bit it himself, you see; and he took the roll of music, and Benjamin Grey and Stubbs both looked on as white as possible; and he unrolled the music, and out fell the diamond bracelet. And then poor, dear Miss Home looked at it sadly, and she said: 'Ah! who has placed this trinket in my music?' But they have not killed her—she is saved—saved. Oh the great, good king! I was down stairs and I saw the sheriff come in; and I heard him say to Mr. Ambrose, a royal pardon arrived at the last moment for Alice Home. Hurrah!"

Timber, in the excitement of his feelings, flung his odd little muffin cap into the air—and being light and eccentric in shape, it floated away in divers currents of air, till it fairly went over the balustrades of the staircase, and so right down to the door-way leading to the shop. And it so happened that Mr. Ambrose was just coming up to the first floor room again, when this charity cap—this apology for a head-dress—came sailing down the well staircase and lit upon his head.

"What? Murder! Help! What is it?"

Mr. Ambrose tore the muffin cap from his head, and then terrible wrath came over him.

"It's that villain, Timber!" he cried. "Hullo! you sir! Where are you?"

"Hush," said Timber. "I will come back again. I must go down now, dear Gerald."

"Go, I will wait for you."

Timber went down.

"I am very sorry, sir. My cap fell over the balusters—I could not help it."

"You are sorry are you? you charity-begotten, vile imp! If I were not too busy with other things, I would give you something to be sorry for, with a vengeance. Be off, sirrah, and sweep out the workshop."

"Yes, sir."

Timber was with Gerald again in a moment.

"Now—now, dear Gerald, tell me what you want me to do."

"I want you, Timber, to keep a watch up; on all that passes here. I want you, for my sake, and for the sake of Alice, to find out what goes on here between Sir Bernfide Esperance and Mr. Ambrose, and if they and that villain, Jonas Brand, hold any consultations; and I want you particularly to find out, if you can, if any further mischief is intended to poor Alice, and what they mean to do on finding I am gone and do not come back."

"Yes; I know—I know."

"And, Timber, you will always find me, when you want me, any evening this week, at nine o'clock, at the railings round the garden of St. James' Square. I know you can come with ease."

"Oh yes. They don't care where I go after the shop is shut up. You see, they make me sleep in the shed in the yard, along with Teaser."

"Teaser? Oh! I forgot. The dog."

"Yes; but he and me are such friends as never was known; and we have such long talks, we do—and if I want to walk at night, or very early in the morning, me and Teaser goes out over the paling, and on to the bridge, and looks at the river; and nobody cares a bit whether I'm in or out, so long as I'm ready to take down the shutters at nine o'clock."

"Very well, Timber. Now, good-bye—I hear the chimes of St. Paul's."

"It's a quarter to one."

"Then the workmen will soon be back; so I am going off, for I don't want to see any one. Good-bye."

"Good-bye, dear Gerald."

"God bless you, Timber—my friend Timber."

Timber burst into tears, and sat down on the stairs to have his cry out.

Gerald stepped out of the house, and with hasty steps took his way westward.

CHAPTER XI.

THE ROAD AND THE COMMON.

We have not sought to mystify the reader. Sufficient for our story's strength are its own incidents. Plainly and clearly we show that the young ensign of the Guards, who was named Harold Blanchard—Mr. Sadgrove, who had the beautiful horse—the king's messenger, who brought the pardon of Alice Home at the last moment to the sheriff, and the formidable and mysterious Owlet, the highwayman, were one and the same person.

What the real and ultimate objects of all these disguises were, we shall perceive as our history proceeds. The game, suffice it to say so much for the present, was one well worth the playing.

It will be recollected that the Owlet disappeared in the midst of a mass of wild and beautiful vegetation in a woody district on the other side of the Thames, as Londoners—who dwell on the Middlesex bank of the river are in the habit of calling the Surrey side, which has a ban set against it by all fashionable folks: that is to say, until some half-dozen miles are passed over; then the county of Surrey recovers its character, and may be endured.

It is the houses—the dense district lying close to the river, on the Surrey side, that labor under the stigma of being anything but fashionable or even mentionable to ears polite.

But the Owlet was free from all the squalid habitations that always throng the shores of a navigable river. The copse, or wood, in which he had disappeared, was fairly in the country.

We will follow him through that apparently impenetrable net-work of shrubs and under-wood.

There was a path.

A path that was just about wide enough to admit of a passage of one person; and when that person passed along it, the boughs of the shrubs that bounded it fell over it and covered it up again.

It followed, then, that to make way along that path required an intimate knowledge of its whereabouts, as well as a constant pressure to move those same overhanging boughs out of the way.

But there was art in all this.

The path had been regularly constructed.

Not a bush or shrub of any kind bounded it on either side that presented any real difficulties. Everything that Nature had armed with spike or bramble had been carefully taken away.

The lilac, the alder, the privet—all harmless, stingless, soft shrubs, bounded this narrow path, so that, with the requisite degree of pressure, a child might have passed along it without a scratch.

It took a sinuous course, did this path, and it abruptly ended in a pond. But the pond was passable by various stepping-stones, that the Owlet knew well where to look for.

Scarcely wetting his feet, he made good a passage across the pond, and then climbed a fence, and alighted in a strange, wild spot that must have possessed many beauties. It was a deserted garden—a garden that at one period had, no doubt, had all the care and attention bestowed upon it that were possible, but which had, for some years, been left to run riot of its own free will. Cultivated plants and flowers had reverted to their old wild condition. Winter's frosts had killed all but the most hardy inhabitants of the soil, but those had made the place all their own.

The Owlet trod his way through a perfect maze of flowers and fruit. And then he came to an open space that had once been a pretty lawn, in the centre of which was a small stone fountain, which had long ceased to send up a jet of water to

"Shake its loosening silver in the sun."

Across this lawn, the first glance of any one who should penetrate so far would fall on an irregularly-shaped cottage. It was built of red brick, like the palace of Kew, and had many odd angles and corners, and old gable-ends, and fanciful windows about it.

In fact, it seemed a kind of architectural

jumble, and differed as much as possible from ordinary house architecture in England, which consists of a huge square box made of brick, in which rectangular holes are made for windows, and one of the same shape for a door.

A pole was thrust into the ground close to the cottage. It was all awry, but a board was nailed to the top of it, on which was the following announcement:

"This cottage to let. Apply at the lodge. Spring-guns and steel-traps are set in the ground. Beware of the dog."

An announcement of such a character was likely to facilitate the active retreat of any adventurous person who might, actuated by curiosity, get thus far in the deserted gardens of the cottage.

But the Owlet had evidently no such fears. So soon as he had fairly passed the little dried-up fountain, he whistled in a peculiar manner, and then called aloud:

"Drift! Drift! Ho! boy! Where are you? Drift! Drift!"

There was a rush of some animal through the tall grass and wild flowers that had made the lawn all their own, and then a deep-toned, baying sound.

"Ah, you are here, my faithful Drift!" cried the Owlet.

As he spoke, there bounded to his side one of those huge dogs of St. Bernard—yellow as a lion, and almost as large as one—a creature with the fidelity of a dog, and almost the understanding of a man.

The Drift, as he was called, was glad to see the Owlet, and fully acknowledged him as his lord and master, it was evident.

It was equally evident that Drift would have been a most uncomfortable personage for any stranger to encounter, who might have penetrated so far into that wilderness of a garden.

Accompanied, then, by the dog, the Owlet made his way to the cottage; but, just as he reached it, a low, gothic door was opened, and a young girl sprang out into the garden, and flung her arms around the neck of the Owlet.

"Dear, dear Harold, I have been so full of fears!"

"Fears, my dear Annie? What fear?"

"Oh, I hardly know, dear Harold. I have had such odd fancies!"

"Well, but Annie you know that I am likely to be late at times."

"Yes, yes; and still, ever since—"

"Since what? But let us come in—I have something to say to you, sister?"

"Something else that you want me to do, dear brother Harold! Oh, you know well that there is nothing in all the world that I would not do or dare for you!"

"I know it well, dear Annie!"

The brother and sister entered the cottage together; but, before he closed the door, the Owlet turned, and spoke to the dog.

He spoke to him in much the same way he would have spoken to any human being:

"Round the house, Drift—round the house, Drift. Keep good guard, Drift!"

The dog made a slight sound, and walked majestically away, as though he would have said: "Certainly, master, I comprehend; and if any one disturbs you, it will not be my fault!"

With the hand of the young girl in his, the Owlet entered a small room at the side of the hall of the cottage—a room in which a wood-fire burnt cheerfully enough upon the hearth, and which was rather over-furnished than otherwise with couches and sofas, and a great quantity of furs and skins.

"My dear Annie," said the Owlet, "this, after all, must be but a dreary abode for you!"

"Not so, dear Harold, so long as you wish me to inhabit it. I contrive to find occupations, although the intervals between your visits do seem long; and, besides, I have not been here for many weeks."

"To-morrow, dear sister, you shall have a change."

"To-morrow, Harold?"

"Yes, dear; you shall go to London. I almost begin to think that the clouds which have obscured our fortunes so long are on the eve of breaking, and showing a clearer vista beyond them!"

"For your sake, dear Harold, I shall be so glad!"

"And I for yours!"

"You think more of me, Harold, than you do of yourself?"

"No. I cannot take that compliment to my unselfishness, Annie; but I can in truth say, that no fortune shall smile upon me that withholds its sunshine from you, dear!"

"I know that well, dear brother. But have you any news?"

"None that particularly concerns our main object, dear Annie; but as some suspicions appear to have been excited in regard to the house in St. James' Square, which I told you of, I have arranged that the front part of it shall be opened, and inhabited in the regular way by a young couple, with whom I shall hope to make you good friends!"

"Oh, that will be charming!"

"I hope so; and it will have the effect of disarming all suspicions and inquiries about the house!"

"And who are they, brother?"

"Most worthy, gentle, and good hearts!"

"Ah, then, it will be very happy!"

"I hope, so, dear!"

"But tell me who they really are?"

"One was about to be hanged this morning!"

"Hanged?"

"Yes; but I got a royal pardon for her, and she is quite safe!"

"But, brother—"

The Owlet laughed:

"Come, come sister, I will not mystify you. The persons to whom you are about to be introduced—I beg pardon—I mean whom I am about to introduce to you—"

Annie smiled:

"That is more proper, brother. We must not forget ourselves, although the world forgets us!"

"Nay, the world does not know us yet, Annie; but it will not forget us, I fancy, when it does. The persons, then, to whom I wish to introduce you are most estimable, and will, I fully believe, act with us in all things!"

"Then they are welcome. But how much are they to know, brother?"

"That is a very proper inquiry, Annie; and I think they ought to know no more than that I am a Mr. St. John, and you a Miss St. John. So you will be upon your guard. And now, as I have work to do—for I want money—I will leave you until day-break, when I will come here, and take you to town; or, if I do not come by day-break, recollect that I will come by about mid-day; for I have an early appointment, which may, by a possibility, prevent me coming early."

"Be it so, brother. I am, as you know, in all things your attached, and humble, and devoted subject."

"Hush!—oh, hush! Not even to these walls!"

"I will be cautious."

"Cautious ever, dear Annie, and silent as death itself!"

"I will, indeed."

"Now farewell. Heaven and its saints guard you!"

"Amen. And you, too, brother—and you, too."

The Owlet turned to a corner of the room, and bowed in a reverent style; but his sister at once stepped to that corner, and opened what looked like the door of a cupboard, and displayed within a regularly-fitted shrine, with an image of the Virgin Mary, and the symbols of Roman Catholicism.

She knelt and prayed.

The Owlet bowed his head; and, for a few minutes, there was heard nothing in the cottage but the voice of devotion.

Then Annie, as she was called, closed the little shrine, and with a look of pleased serenity, she said:

"Go, brother, I feel sure that you will be under the protection of Heaven."

"And I, too; for Heaven protects the right."

The Owlet pressed his sister for a moment to his heart, and then left the cottage.

In another quarter of an hour, he was on horseback, and rapidly making his way toward Barnes Common.

Owing to the royal family being at Kew Palace, the route from there to London had become quite populous; and at all hours of the day and night, the carriages of ministers and court and state functionaries were on the road.

By a wild clump of trees on the common, which had withstood many a gale, although not without being much contracted of what would otherwise have been their fair proportions, the Owlet drew rein.

He glanced upward at the drifting clouds, as he said, in a low, soft voice:

"Madam Luna will soon show herself through some of those rifts."

Strapped on to the crupper of the saddle was a small, oblong kind of valise, such as some experienced traveler might carry with him on a journey; and this the Owlet now opened, and took from it a something that would, at the first glance, have much puzzled any one to define.

But whatever that something was, he carefully placed it over his head—after pushing his hair as far back as it would go; and then, by dint of careful manipulation—for the something he was putting on was elastic—he dragged it over his entire head, and then with care pulled it over his face.

It was his owlet's mask.

So soon as he had it well fitted and close under his chin, he looked completely disguised in that fearful visage, and as like a man with the head of an owl as it was possible to look.

Then he put on a half-mask, such as were then in use at masquerades (a then fashionable entertainment in London), and placing his hat and feathers over all, he was once again the highwayman, ready for the road, or for any adventure that promised plunder.

"This is a strange life," he muttered, to himself; "and yet it has its charms. I almost think that I shall regret it, even if the highest fortune to which I can aspire in this land should be mine."

He looked carefully to the priming of his pistols, and with a satisfactory "All's right!" he returned them to their holsters.

Then, just as a huge cloud sailed away from before the face of the sky—like some gigantic, floating island in a sea of dark blue—the moon, which was about half its course, shone out, and tree, and leaf, and wild-flower, and grass, all became tinged with silvery radiance.

The grinding sound of carriage-wheels on the road that passed over the heath now came clearly on the night-air.

"That will do, no doubt," said the Owlet. "We will see what Fortune has in store to-night."

He listened for a few seconds; and then, at an easy trot, he went down the road to meet the carriage.

There was a slight hollow in the road, which had been but roughly cut over the heath; and into that the carriage had just driven, when the Owlet trotted down from the higher ground toward it.

He drew from his saddle a pistol, and, suddenly wheeling his horse half round, so that he faced the side of the carriage, he cried out, in a loud, clear voice:

"Halt—halt!"

The coachman reluctantly drew rein; but, the moment after, he cried out: "Good Lord! it's a highwayman!" And he commenced lashing the horses, to get them into a gallop.

"Murder!" cried a footman, who was behind the coach.

"Halt, or you are a dead man!" shouted the Owlet.

Bang! went the pistol.

The coachman abandoned the reins, and rolled off the box.

"Stand, Leo!" said the Owlet.

His horse stood still as a statue; and he at once dismounted, and ran up to the prostrate coachman.

"Get up, idiot!"

"Yes, sir. Mercy upon me!"

"Get up!"

"I am—I do. But I'm shot!"

"You will be, if you don't stand at your horses' heads, and keep them still!"

"A wife and family, my good sir—seven small children, all under three years of age—I mean three small children, under seven!"

"Peace! or it will be worse for you!"

"It can't be worse, sir, unless the next are twins! O Lord!—O Lord! I'm lost! Murder!"

The Owlet clapped the muzzle of a pistol against the coachman's forehead, just between the eyes, as he said:

"If you utter another word, I will fire. Look to your horses, and be quiet!"

The coachman was silent.

"Halloa! Samuel—Samuel!" cried a voice from the carriage, "what is the meaning of all this?"

"Only a highwayman, sir!" said the Owlet.

"A what?"

"A highwayman!"

"Then take that, you rascal!"

Bang! went a pistol; and the Owlet felt the whiff of the bullet, as it passed his eyes.

"Ah!" he said, "too near to be pleasant!"

Another moment, and he had reached the coach door, and, tearing it open, he flung up the mask he wore, and, lifting his hat and feathers from his head, exhibited his owl's head and face, as he said, in the odd, croaking accents of a parrot:

"Who is so tired of life that he will throw it away on the folly of a shot at me?"

A lady, who was in the carriage, screamed and fainted at once.

A gentleman, with a pistol in each hand, turned very pale, as he said:

"The Owlet! Then it is true!"

"The Owlet!" replied the highwayman. "If you wish for another shot at me, take it, and that will give me two at you!"

CHAPTER XII.

THE BOOTY OF A NIGHT.

When the gentleman who had fired at the Owlet, and who still held one undischarged pistol in his hand, heard the extraordinary speech with which our last chapter concluded, he dropped the pistol on to the seat of the carriage, as he said:

"No—I—don't want to take your life!"

"A lie!" said the Owlet.

"You villain!"

"Fire, then! You will not harm me; but your own destruction will be certain. Fire!"

The gentleman evaded the matter, by saying:

"What is it you want?"

"Your purse, my Lord Seaford!"

"You know me?"

"Your diamond ring that you have just taken from your finger and hidden, and your pocket-book."

Lord Seaford looked astonished.

"How do you know?"

"Quick! I have no time to waste!"

"There, then; and as for the shot I have had at you, it was but natural that, when attacked on the road, I should have it, as you well know. I hope and trust that robbery is your only object with me."

"That is all; but yet you are in danger."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. You are looking at your second pistol; and you are thinking that, when I turn my back, you will lift it from that cushion and fire it at me."

Lord Seaford looked confused.

"Confess, my lord, that such was your intention."

Lord Seaford withdrew his hand from too close a proximity to the pistol.

"Take my money," he said, "and go in peace. You need fear nothing."

"Fear!" said the Owlet, in that strange, bird-like, croaking voice, which lost all its grotesqueness, and sounded only terrible from the owl's head. "Fear! Do you think I fear? No, I spoke for your sake."

"Mine?"

"Yes. You would have fired at me. The bullet would not have harmed me, and I should have turned and taken your life on the moment—for the act would have been a treacherous one. Beware! I say."

Lord Seaford was silent.

He handed his purse—he handed his pocket-book—he handed his diamond ring to the Owlet.

"You have all!"

"I have the honor, then, of wishing your lordship a good-evening."

"One moment."

"What is it?"

"Since you have stopped me, and since the story is not a good one to tell, I would rather some one else had similarly suffered, to keep me in countenance."

"What mean you?"

"Lord Hamilton will in half an hour pass this way."

"I comprehend."

"Of course you do. And now, I suppose, I may go on without further interruption?"

"You may."

The Owlet slowly left the carriage-door. Once, twice, did Lord Seaford stretch forth his hand toward the pistol that lay still undischarged upon the cushion of the carriage; and as often did he draw back; for there was cowardice at his heart as well as superstition.

The Owlet did not look round.

That ounce of cowardice and that grain of superstition, that were in the heart of Lord Seaford, saved him.

The pistol was not fired, and the Owlet reached his horse in safety. His own audacity had saved him, as it had done on other occasions.

"To town! to town! Drive on!" said Lord Seaford.

The coachman scrambled, half dead with fear, on to the box.

The footman crept down from the roof of the coach, on which he had been lying at full length during the whole affair.

"I hope, my lord," he said—as he touched his hat, and tremblingly closed the carriage-door—"I hope, my lord, your lordship don't blame me."

"I blame nobody. To town at once!"

The carriage drove on, and the Owlet had Barnes' Common again to himself.

The moon had got into a ruck of small, fleecy clouds, which, although they did not wholly obscure its rays, yet had the effect of depriving them of their sharp, silvery beauty: a white kind of twilight was upon the Common.

Then the Owlet slowly walked his horse in the direction from which, assuming Lord Seaford's intelligence to be true, Lord Hamilton would come; and soon he heard the grinding of wheels upon the loose, gravelly soil of which the road was composed.

But along with that sound he heard the regular beat of horses' feet, to a greater extent than was at all warranted by the pair of horses in a carriage, or even if there had been four horses.

"Does he travel with an escort?" said the Owlet to himself, as he halted some distance from the roadside in a clump of shrubs about four feet in height, and dismounted.

"Down, Leo," he then said. "We must reconnoitre a little. Down, Leo—down!"

He touched the horse in a peculiar manner on the fore feet, and the creature slowly and deliberately lay down on its side behind the shrubs—which, otherwise, would have been quite insufficient as a place of concealment to a mounted man.

The Owlet knelt down, and rested partly on the shoulder of his horse, as he looked through the bushes toward the road.

The noise of horses' feet, and the grinding of carriage-wheels, rapidly neared.

"One, two, three, four," counted the Owlet, as that number of horsemen came into sight.

Four officers connected with the court rode on, and then followed the carriage of Lord Hamilton.

It was not that these four officers formed an escort to Lord Hamilton's carriage, except accidentally. They would have felt their dignity very much impeached by being mistaken for such; but they had happened to start from Kew at the same time; and the pace they went at, and the pace of Lord Hamilton's carriage-horses, kept the party together.

It is possible enough that his lordship's coachman was not sorry to have company upon the road, and so kept up his pace to the four mounted gentlemen; but be that as it may, the Owlet felt that the odds were too much against him, and that it would not do to attempt to stop such a cavalcade.

And so Lord Hamilton escaped the fate which his dear friend, Lord Seaford, so sincerely hoped would befall him.

Horsemen and carriage swept on, until they were lost in the faint light of the half-obscured moon. The Owlet rose from his post of observation, and called to his horse:

"Up, Leo! up! We must wait for what good fortune may befall us yet on the heath. Up, good horse! up!"

The horse was on his feet in a moment, and the Owlet vaulted into the saddle.

No sooner had he done so, than he became aware that two horsemen were approaching, at a sharp trot, from toward London. They must have passed Lord Hamilton and his friends about half a mile from where the Owlet now stood, fully revealed against the night sky.

These two horsemen were conversing eagerly; and, owing to the intense stillness on the common, the Owlet was able to hear very distinctly the voice of the one who was speaking.

His words awakened a new interest in the breast of the Owlet; for in them not only did he recognize an enemy, but he had heard something which put him in mind of what Alice Home had related to him in the few words that had comprised her artless history.

"Then, Jonas," said the speaker, "let that be quite understood between us. We meet at Weymouth to-morrow at sunset, and then to Corfe Castle; and if this should turn out of the importance to me that it may be, you shall have your demand doubled, although it may not be convenient to me to give it to you all at once."

"I can wait," said Jonas Brand—for it was no other than the thief-taker—"I can wait."

"Very good. Then I need not take you any further."

Not only had the Owlet recognized the voice of the officer Jonas Brand, but he knew that of his companion; and he said at once to himself:

"That is Sir Bernfide Esperance, who hovers about the court, and bears no good character. A pistol-shot now would rid poor Alice at once and forever of that fierce enemy. No—no! It would savor too much of the bravo way of doing business—clear away your foes by death! It does clear them away; but the method is not one that recommends itself to my mind. Yet I will speak to this man."

It would have looked manifestly suspicious, if the Owlet had ridden away over the common, after he must have been seen by both Sir Bernfide Esperance and Jonas Brand; so, instead of doing so, he rode on as if going to Kew; but at such a pace that Sir Bernfide would soon overtake him—unless, indeed, he should take alarm, and turn off in some other direction.

But in that case the Owlet would have been after him, and Leo would soon have obliterated the distance between them.

"There is some one on the road, Jonas," said Sir Bernfide.

"I see there is."

"Who can it be?"

"The road to Kew is populous enough. I should say he was an officer by his mode of riding. But if you have any fears—"

"Fears? Pho! I never have any fears!"

"I was going to say I would ride on with you."

"No, no. Good-night, good-night. I have business at Kew, but I shall be in town right early in the morning. Good-night, Jonas."

"Good-night, Sir Bernfide."

"Double, does he say?" muttered Jonas Brand. "If indeed there be any great secret connected with the papers and the valise which Alice Home declared were hidden in the dry well at Corfe Castle, I will know it, and it is not two thousand pounds that will keep me silent."

"I must promise that villain anything, so long as he is useful to me," said Sir Bernfide Esperance, as he rode on. "And so soon as he ceases to be so, I will give him an ounce of lead in his brains, or a foot of cold steel between his ribs; for I must be rid of him."

The Owlet had ridden leisurely on, and Sir Bernfide was rapidly overtaking him.

"A fine night, sir," said Sir Bernfide Esperance, as he came within about a couple of horse-lengths of the Owlet. "Do you ride to Kew?"

"No, sir," said the Owlet. "It is a fine night, however, for all that."

"Very; although the moon is capricious."

"You are right, sir."

The Owlet fairly wheeled round his horse, Leo, and faced Sir Bernfide Esperance, who reined in so suddenly that his own horse lifted its fore-feet from the ground, and pranced with them in the air for a moment, as Sir Bernfide cried: "Ah! the Owlet!"

"Yes; the Owlet, Sir Bernfide Esperance; and if you attempt to escape, or to draw a pistol from your saddle, you are a dead man on the instant."

"Oh! ah! Well, I suppose—eh?—that I am to be robbed."

"The gold that at present jingles in your purse is so polluted that even I will not touch it; but from out your bad heart I will have a something."

"You—you want my life?"

"No; or if I do want it, I will not take it thus, except on provocation."

Sir Bernfide breathed more freely. He cast an anxious glance behind him; but Jonas Brand was far away.

"Your associate in criminality," said the Owlet, "is too far off to aid you. You are alone."

"Alone—alone, and with you?"

"And with me. Speak, and speak the truth, Sir Bernfide Esperance, or I will tear it from your heart."

With a bound, Leo was by the side of Sir Bernfide's horse, and the pistol of the Owlet was within two inches of the eyes of the baronet.

"What would you have?" he said, faintly.

"What can you want to say to me?"

"You are the representative of the younger branch of the Morton family. The earl of that name—"

"Well; all the world knows that."

"You are waiting for the death of the poor mad Earl Morton, who for twenty-two years has now been an inmate of an asylum, in order to claim the title and estates."

"Because then the elder branch of the family will be extinct."

"No!"

"But—"

"I say no; and you know well that it is so! You know well that the earl's brother—who was a proscribed Jacobite—was married!"

"No—I—"

"Peace! Do not force me to any act of anger which my calmer judgment might denounce, without enabling me to undo. You know not only that he married, but that, when he was assassinated, he left behind him a daughter."

"But, my good sir, it is of an earldom we speak of. Daughters, you know, are of no use."

"There was a special patent granted in the reign of Charles the Second to the then earl, which made the title and estates pass to female heirs in regular descent."

"Ah!"

"Yes; and you know it well. The daughter, therefore, of the present poor mad earl's brother will be, or should be, the Countess of Morton."

"Well, sir," said Sir Bernfide Esperance, "since you are so well advised, and so well instructed in the genealogy of the family, why stop you me upon this gloomy common?"

"It is well asked, sir."

Sir Bernfide made an ironical sort of bow to the Owlet, who took no notice of it, but added:

"Are you prepared to admit the right of Captain the Honorable Charles Morton's daughter, then?"

"Oh yes!"

"At once?"

"As soon as that right is proved."

"Proved. How?"

"According to law."

"And you will fight the orphan, then, with her own property, of which you will get possession?"

"My good sir, what would you have?"

"I want a letter which was addressed by Captain Morton, from Bruges, to his brother, announcing his marriage, and stating where and how the proofs of it could be procured."

"A letter?"

The baronet, with an instinctive movement, pressed his arm upon a pocket in the inside of his vest.

"You have betrayed yourself."

"How? How?"

"You have that letter about you."

"Never. If such a letter had ever existed, it would have been folly not to destroy it; that is to say, if you do right in the motives and in the unscrupulous line of conduct you attribute to me!"

"Yet you have it!"

"No—no!"

"I say you have! It is no uncommon thing for some strange superstition, or other feeling which cannot be defined, to induce men like you to preserve documents which may be their destruction; and so I say you have such a letter, and I will have it."

"Not with my life!"

"You are a bold man to say as much, and see the weapon of death in my hand."

"I say it, because I cannot believe that you would commit a murder in cold blood."

"You may call it 'cold blood' if the words please you, Sir Bernfide Esperance," said the Owlet; "but my blood is warm enough with indignation, and so is yours with fear; but yet I will not murder you."

"It would be murder."

"It would after this parley. Before it, I should only have called it killing!"

"A nice distinction, truly."

So soon as he thought his life safe, Sir Bernfide could be cool, keen, and sarcastic.

"But," added the Owlet, without noticing the sneers, "you have a sword, and I will fight you for that letter. If I conquer you, I will take it from you, even though it should be half obliterated with your heart's blood. If you conquer me, you can claim the credit of having overcome the much-dreaded Owlet in fair fight."

"No, I will not fight with you. You may have hidden associates, who will kill me in any case."

"I am alone!"

"How do I know that?"

"Look around you. There the moon comes kindly from behind a cloud to let you see the common. We are both alone; and no sound of horse's hoof or grate of carriage-wheel disturbs the stillness of the spot. Sir Bernfide Esperance, you must and shall fight!"

"And if I refuse?"

"I will slash a cross upon your face with my sword, and I will skin you, but I will find the letter."

Sir Bernfide Esperance turned white for a moment, even despite his swarthy complexion, and then a red flush of anger, combined with fear, settled about his eyes.

"Come," he said, "since it must be so, I will fight. Shall it be on horseback, or on foot?"

"On foot. Dismount!"

The Owlet was on foot in a moment; and then the baronet made one despairing effort to escape, by suddenly plunging the spurs into his horse's flanks, in the hope of, by a plunge, freeing himself from his companion, and being able to gallop away.

But the Owlet's hand was on the rein. He pressed the horse back on to its haunches.

"Your steed is restive, sir," he said. "I am afraid you accidentally touched him with the spur. Dismount!"

Sir Bernfide dismounted.

The horse at once galloped off.

"My horse is gone!"

"Your own fault."

"Nay—"

"You goaded it."

"But what shall I do now—on Barnes' Common, and my horse gone from me?"

"You will not want it. It is a grave on Barnes' Common that you will want—not a horse!"

The Owlet drew the long, thin, straight sword he wore, and it flashed in the moonlight, as he added:

"Now, sir, come!"

"But—if I refuse?"

"I will run you through at once."

"Perdition seize you!"

A violent and frantic accession of rage had come over Sir Bernfide Esperance; and he tore his sword from its scabbard, and made a furious onslaught upon the Owlet, who parried all his thrusts with consummate skill and coolness, as he said:

"Ah! that is as it should be. You fight now—you fight now! and fight well, too, considering."

"Devil!"

"No, no."

"Fiend! if I only could kill you!"

"Try. Good, good! but that is a long way off from killing me, my friend. Excuse me calling you friend; but I always feel a sort of bastard affection for a man when I fight with him. This is the way. You lounge this way, you parry thus, then a feint, and then you do it—ah!"

The long, glittering sword of the Owlet passed through the body of Sir Bernfide Esperance, who uttered a loud shriek, and then, after beating the air with his own sword for a moment, fell to the ground.

"God! God! God!" he cried.

Each time that he uttered the majestic name of the Divinity, he tore up a handful of grass from the common.

The Owlet bent over him. He tore open his vest, and in an inner pocket he found a small book tied round with silk. He cut the

silk, and opened the book. A faded letter met his sight, and by the moonlight he read the address:

"To our dear and most worshipful brother, the Earl of Morton—these."

"That will do," he said. "This is important for Alice."

Then he leaned over the prostrate form of the wounded man, and spoke:

"Sir Bernfide Esperance, are you dead? are you dead? Silence will give consent, and I will fling the body into the pond by the end of the common."

"No," said Sir Bernfide, faintly. "Murder! murder! murder!"

"Not at all. But it is as well you spoke. And now I bid you good-night, my friend; and I have only one last remark to make to you. You will not go to Corfe Castle with your friend, Jonas Brand, to-morrow."

"Ah!"

"You hear me?"

"Fiend! devil!"

"No; if I were, I would take you with me. Good-night!"

CHAPTER XIII.

ALICE IN HER NEW HOME.

The day that Alice spent in that magnificent apartment to which she had been introduced by the Owlet, was the one most full of strange and varying feelings that had ever passed over her young head.

It was not likely that she would feel any weariness. Her escape from a terrible and disgraceful death was a theme for such entire congratulation and thankfulness, that she could never tire of it.

And then the new sort of relation she held to Gerald, whom, in a few short hours, she had told that she loved, and consented to wed.

How strange and dreamlike everything appeared to her!

The room itself, too, was an endless source of amusement to her. It was filled with those thousand and one nic-nacks which wealth scatters about such an apartment with such lavish profusion.

There was one thing, however, which was not in accordance with any other object in the room, and which awakened the curiosity of Alice.

An iron gauntlet.

Such a gauntlet as a knight of the Middle Ages might have worn. It was placed by itself, without a fellow, or any indication as to whom it had belonged to, on a marble table.

Alice could not help regarding this gauntlet as in some way connected with her fate and history; and yet she could form no tangible theory upon the subject.

The whole suite of rooms—there were four—engaged her attention; and it was some hours before she began to ask herself if Gerald ought not to be back again.

Six struck by a splendid clock, ornamented with gilding, and series of compartments beautifully painted, and representing Arcadian scenes.

Alice did not know that at that hour of six Gerald had reached the little, old, wretched street called King street, and was waiting for their friend, whom they only knew yet as a king's messenger.

And Gerald was anxious to see Alice, and it was a great disappointment to him that he saw not at that, the appointed time, the messenger.

But Gerald had not waited many minutes, when he heard a rolling noise, and something fell at his feet, which had slid off from the roof of the small outhouse just over the garden wall.

He picked it up. It was a stone with a slip of paper rolled about it.

On the paper were the following words:

"Follow him who will lead. I am busy, and far off."

Hardly had Gerald time to read these words, when a small man, in a suit of very dingy black, passed him, saying, as he did so:

"I lead!"

"I follow, then!" said Gerald.

Gerald did not doubt, for a moment, but that the note came from his and Alice's friend; and he was assured of this when the small man in the faded black garments opened the same door in the wall that the king's messenger had done, and led him by the same route.

He did not question his leader, but he fully expected to be conducted to the same room

in which he had left Alice. Such, however, was not the fact, for the small man in the dingy black, and who had very much the air of a priest, led him into another apartment, in which a boy with refreshments was placed, and through a half-open door from which might be seen a bed chamber.

The small man in black made a slight bow, and left Gerald at once alone, closing the door very softly behind him, but not so softly that Gerald did not hear the lock slide into its socket.

The idea that he was a prisoner was not a pleasant one to Gerald. He glanced around him with some uneasiness, and then he saw, pasted on a large mirror that was in the room, a slip of paper.

This paper had writing on it, and Gerald perused it with curiosity, if not with contentment.

"Rest, Gerald Alton, and to-morrow you will see her whom you love, and him who is your and her friend. Rest content, and in peace and in safety."

"Ah!" said Gerald, with a sigh, as he sat down, "it seems that I have no other resource; and yet, why should I be discontented, ungrateful that I am for all blessings, and, most of all, for the saving of my Alice? Yes; I will rest. I will be content. I will contrast my present position with what it might have been, even at this moment."

And Gerald covered his eyes with his hands, so as to shut out external objects, and his mind looked in, so to speak, upon itself; and he saw all that shouting, yelling crowd that was accompanying his darling Alice to death; he saw the officers mounted on those rough, strong horses, with which they could trample down opposition. He saw that villainous Jonas Brand, who made a point of doing all he could to quench the life of Alice.

No wonder, then, that many a shudder passed from heart to brain of poor Gerald, and that a radiant smile glanced through his tears as he looked again around him, and felt that she was saved.

"A life of devotion and love to her," he said, "and a life of gratitude to him who saved her. I shall be happy, if Heaven will but permit me to spend the remainder of my days in such pleasant occupations."

Gerald was full of these thoughts, when he heard a slight cough from some one who, from the character of the sound, evidently adopted that mode of letting him know that he was no longer alone.

Gerald started to his feet, and looked around him, hurriedly.

Leaning on the back of a chair—his old, thin, sharp face just visible above it, was a man who, with keen, intellectual eyes, was regarding Gerald.

"Sir," said Gerald, "I did not know—"

"No; you did not know that I was here—but this mansion is full of surprises. Be assured, however, that, let the fashion of my entrance into this room be what it may, I am a friend to you, and a devoted servant to him of whom you were speaking."

"Of whom I was speaking, sir? I did not speak."

"Ah! You were not aware, I see, that the warm effusion of your gratitude was uttered aloud. Come, there is no harm done."

The man slipped from behind the chair, and then Gerald saw that he was attired in a long kind of gown, of ribbed black silk, fastened by a band round the waist, and that on the shoulders of this gown-like garment was embroidered a cross in crimson silk.

The slightly-foreign accent, too, in which this man spoke, and the tonsure that showed itself amid his gray hairs, all betokened him to be a foreign ecclesiastic.

Gerald, too, from his figure and his voice guessed him to be the little man who, in faded black, had accosted him in King street, and told him to follow him.

"Well," said the priest, with a smile, after Gerald had regarded him for some time with fixed attention. "Well, there is nothing very alarming about my appearance?"

"No, no! But—"

"But what?"

"I am rather surprised at your costume."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. It seems to me that you wear the dress of a Roman Catholic priest, and I thought that was forbidden in England."

"And if it were," said the priest, mildly, "it yet would be no crime. Oh! is it not

amazing that man should feel anger at his brother-man for the manner in which he shall choose to worship the Creator, who is acknowledged by all. But that is not my object here. It is to earth, and to earthly objects and feelings, I must give my attention."

Gerald was silent, for the words of the priest seemed to him to be of too abstract a character to interest him; but he was soon roused from his inattention; or, rather, his want of interest.

The priest, after regarding him in silence for some few moments, suffered his lips to part into a kindly smile, as he said:

"Alice Home!"

Gerald started at the name, and uttered a cry:

"Alice! Alice! What of her?"

"Ah! that rouses you? Well, it is of her I come to speak to you."

"Of Alice? Oh! tell me what? What has happened? She is well—alive—"

"Oh yes. She is both alive and well, and I thought that it would cheer your solitude if you could hold converse with her."

"It would. Oh! take me to her. Take me to her, sir, at once."

"Be patient. This room that you now occupy adjoins another that you have seen."

"The large saloon?"

"Just so. And this—and this small oval girandole turns on a centre, as you see."

The priest touched some spring in the gilt frame of a girandole, which was near one of the panels of the room, and it turned on two pivots, or points, at the extremities of its magic axis, so that a space was left on each side of it; and no sooner was that accomplished, than Gerald heard the voice of Alice.

"Dear Gerald, I am so happy, and so glad to see you!"

"Alice!—my Alice!"

Gerald could just look through the small opening in the wall.

Alice stood upon a chair.

Then he put one arm on each side of the girandole, the edge of which was toward him, and taking the hands of Alice, he covered them with kisses.

"Dear Gerald," she said, "you have come back safely."

"Yes, my Alice; and we will part no more. God's blessings be ever upon you, dearest."

"And upon you, too, Gerald."

"We shall be so happy."

"Yes; so happy—if—if—"

"If what, darling Alice?"

"If it be not yet all a dream?"

"Oh! no, no—a thousand times! We are in the hands of some kindly and beneficent being, who is intent upon making happiness for us."

"We are in the hands of Heaven, Gerald."

"Yes, dearest, yes. Do you know I have procured the necessary license and authority for our marriage?"

"So soon?"

"Ah, yes. Can it be too soon for us to be united, in the name of God, to part no more?"

"You are right, my Gerald; and, after all that has taken place, I will not be guilty of the affectation of denying that my heart bounds with joy at the idea of being ever and ever with you."

"O my Alice!—my own dear one—my first, last, and only love! How can I tell you what rapture—what exquisite joy your words bring to my heart. Dear, dear Alice—if all the devotion—all the tenderness—all the dear affection—of a heart that will know no change—no change—"

The tears of Gerald fell fast. His voice was choked by sobs of delight. He could only press the hands of Alice alternately to his heart and to his lips.

And she too! Was she not happy in the love of that noble soul, which had already shown such devotion and affection to her? Ah, yes!—happy—happy Alice.

"Gerald," she said, after a pause, "you know I am but a poor orphan girl."

"And what am I?" said Gerald. "Ah, my Alice! it seems as if, by the goodness of God, we two—waifs and strays, as we were upon the ocean of society—were brought together to be all the world to each other."

"Yes, Gerald; yes."

"But do not let me forget. How and why is it, my Alice, that Sir Bernfide Esperance has so violent a hatred to you that he should even conspire against your life?"

"Alas! I know not."

"The villain! Oh, the time will come—and that shortly too—when I will force the confession of villainy from his lips where all shall hear it. Alice, dearest, I have been home. Nay, I will not call it home—I mean that I have been to Mr. Ambrose's; and, while there, I overheard such dreadful revelations between Mr. Ambrose and Sir Bernfide Esperance, that, even while the words reached my ears and understanding, I could scarcely believe there could be such wickedness in the world."

"I feel that there was some fearful plot for my destruction; and yet I know not how I—a poor, defenceless orphan girl—could harm those men."

"Nor I, as yet, dear one; but I will know, if I have to extort the secret with a sword-point from their hearts."

"But you will not—you will not, dear Gerald—court danger! Oh remember, now, that your safety is my safety—your life my life. Let those who are wicked, Gerald, go their own wicked way. Heed them not, dear heart; for it would seem, now, that we have escaped them, and reached a haven of peace and security."

"Yes, my Alice, it would seem so—"

"And it is so," said the priest.

Gerald uttered an exclamation of surprise, and so did Alice.

"You had forgotten me," said the old man. It was natural that you should do so. You are both right. It will be the task, Gerald Alton, of him in whose house you now are to discover all the villainy which has been attempted to be achieved in regard to this young and innocent maiden; and it will be for him to point out to you the mode by which you may avenge it."

"No, no!" cried Alice.

"No?"

"No, I say. Gerald must not be an avenger."

"Not in your cause, dearest?"

"In no cause, dear Gerald. We will be content to escape the snare, and will forgive the fowler."

"We shall see," said the priest. "Speak not too unadvisedly. Heaven is the avenger; but if it shall choose to appoint human instruments, those human instruments so appointed must obey the behest."

"Yes, sir," said Alice; "but they must be very sure it is not human passion they are mistaking for heavenly commands."

"Ah!" cried the priest, with an accent of surprise. "So young, and so analytical. Ah!"

"Gerald," added Alice, "I wish to get from you now a promise."

"A promise from me, dearest? Of what?"

"That you will undertake no enterprise, either of discovery or vengeance, without my knowledge, and without my consent."

"No—no!" cried the priest.

"I promise," said Gerald.

"It is indiscreet, young man; for there are things for men to do, which, only to speak of, would blanch with fear the cheek of maidenhood."

"I have promised."

"And having promised, dear Gerald, I know that you will keep your word."

"In truth I will, dear, dear Alice."

The old priest muttered something which was too indistinct for Gerald to hear, and then he said, aloud:

"Do you know that, in doing what I have—that is, in contriving this interview between you—I have transgressed my instructions, and done wrong; but I thought it would contribute to your happiness."

"It has indeed, sir, and we thank you."

"We do thank you," added Alice, "with all our hearts."

"Rest then, now, content. Each to your chambers, and let sleep picture to you both pleasant visions."

"Adieu, dear, dear Alice."

"Good-night, my Gerald."

The old priest closed the opening in the wall; and then, with a faint smile, he opened a tall, narrow door, which looked like a portion of paneling merely, and left the room.

in the morning, when Ensign Harold Blanchard made his way, in a sauntering, careless manner, toward the guard-chamber of St. James' Palace.

A change of the sentinels would take place at six, in and about the palace; and a subaltern, who was on duty, was half-dozing in a large chair in the guard-room.

A wax candle was still burning, but very low down in the socket of the silver candlestick. Its fellow had burned right out.

A thin, tall-necked flask of wine was on the table, and a couple of glasses.

The young subaltern looked very uneasy. On the entrance of Harold Blanchard he started up.

"Halloa!" he said. "Guard to be changed?"

"Not yet, I fancy. I want the colonel."

"Ah! ah! And at this hour. We all thought as much, when we saw that old Balriffin come here."

"And pray what did you all think in your united wisdoms?"

"Why, that a duel was about to take place, which you know of; so don't be putting on an innocent look, as if you had no idea of such a thing, Harold!"

"Well; it's no crime, I fancy!"

"No! But if it is some ridiculous affair that the colonel has been drawn into by old Balriffin, it ought to have been put a stop to, that is all."

"It is no such thing, my friend!"

"No duel?"

"I do not mean that; but I mean that it is not a ridiculous affair."

"Oh, very well! Good luck to the colonel, that is all I have to say about it."

"Amen!"

Ensign Harold Blanchard crossed the guard-chamber, and tapped at the door of the room beyond. It was immediately flung open, and Colonel Blanchard appeared, with his cloak muffled closely around him.

"I am ready," he said.

The young subaltern rose and gravely saluted the colonel as he stalked across the guard-room. Then the colonel paused for a moment at the door, and spoke in a low, deep tone:

"Hargrave, if I should not be back within one hour from now, will you kindly speak to Captain Bisset, and ask him to take command."

"Yes, colonel."

"Good-morning, Hargrave."

The colonel held out his hand, which the young subaltern grasped fervently.

Another moment, and Colonel Blanchard, with his supposed cousin, Harold, had left the palace.

"By Jove, I'll see something of it!" said Hargrave; "or there shall be more reason than I know of to prevent me. Halloa, sergeant—sergeant!"

"Yes, your honor."

"You can see to the relief. I am going out!"

"Yes, your honor."

The young subaltern hastily buckled on his sword, and throwing his cloak over his shoulders, he hurried in the direction of Hyde Park.

Colonel Blanchard and Harold had gone from the old Palace by the entrance next to St. James' Park, and were walking rapidly up the Mall, in order to cross the green park, and so make their way to Hyde Park.

Hargrave saw them in advance, and only kept far enough off that he might escape observation.

Dueling in England has already been condemned, and contrary to law; but there have been times when fashion dictated the hostile meeting as the only mode by which the disputes of gentlemen could be settled; and when dueling was so common, that scarcely a week passed without an encounter, resulting in more or less mischief.

The back of old Montague House, in Bloomsbury Fields, had at one time been the favorite place of meeting; but at the time of which we write, "The Ring," as it was called, in Hyde Park, had the preference.

This "Ring" was a nearly circular piece of turf, so formed; and left by several paths and roads which surrounded it; and although it was pretty well exposed to observation, no one ever thought of interfering with the sport of gentlemen, if they chose to assemble there for a little diversion with the small-sword.

And it was the sword which was the weapon almost always in use.

Indeed, the decline of dueling, and its extinction in England, may be dated from the period when the hair-trigger pistol, carrying a half-ounce ball, came into fashion.

To meet your adversary with a sword, and so have a fair stand-up fight, is a very different thing to standing at a distance of twelve paces, and just touching a hair-trigger. Men of courage shrunk from the cool sort of butchery which the fire-arms represented. The wound from the pistol-bullet was a double wound; it was one at the moment of its reception, and it was another at the hands of the surgeon when it came to be extracted.

The latter was the worst of the two.

But in a duel with the sword, blood was drawn; and, if the wound were at all serious, the seconds at once interfered, and there was an end of the affair. It was but a hurt with cold steel, and but little surgery was required—moreover, people who did not feel quite certain of their skill with the sword, were careful of giving offence, whereas any man can fire a pistol.

Hence the adoption of the pistol as the weapon of the duelist, certainly in England, was the death-blow of the fashion of dueling.

But when Colonel Blanchard, of His Majesty's Guards, went out on that fine September morning to meet Mr. Charles Beauchamp, it was in what may be called by many "the good old times," when a couple of gentlemen coolly met in Hyde Park, bowed to each other, measured their swords, and then set to work.

Sometimes it happened, too, that the seconds made their bows, and just for good fellowship had a pass or two together, to show how friendly inclined they were.

Colonel Blanchard walked swiftly on, until he and Harold came within sight of Hyde Park corner, where Apsley House now stands, and then he turned to Harold, as he said in a calm, resolute voice:

"So this will be the end."

"The end, colonel? What do you mean?"

"I mean that that young man will kill me!"

"He will do so if you go on to the ground with a resolve to be killed; but not otherwise."

"Yes; I feel sure of it. Blood, you see, will have blood! The time has come; but at least I hope—"

The colonel paused.

"What do you hope, Colonel Blanchard?"

"That the mode of my death will save my honor and my memory from reproach."

"Colonel Blanchard, you will not be killed by this young man who has no right whatever to fasten this quarrel upon you, and who, therefore must take the consequences."

"No—no!"

"I say yes. I cannot help feeling that I am in a certain degree mixed up with you in this affair. It was I who interfered at the moment of the death of Captain Beauchamp, and perhaps the advice I gave you then, and on which you have acted, may not have been exactly the best; but still, as things are, I feel bound to see that you are not killed!"

"Sir?"

"I say I feel bound to preserve you by all the means in my power, Colonel Blanchard."

"I do not comprehend you. What possible means can a third person have of preserving any one who is fighting a duel? Nothing short of a personal interference—and that is too absurd to think of—could have any effect on the fortune of the fight!"

"I don't know that, colonel. We shall see. I had a very strange dream last night!"

"Indeed? So did I."

"You too. Perhaps you will tell me yours, colonel, and then I will tell you mine."

"Nay, you mentioned your dream first. Let us have it. We can walk fast and still converse."

"Very well. I dreamt then about this duel, and thought that Charles Beauchamp had wounded you, and that he had his sword at your throat, when another person stepped over you as you lay upon the ground, and in a very strange voice, which did not sound human, said: 'Let us finish!' and in a moment had run Charles Beauchamp through the neck."

"Who was it?"

"I don't know; but the voice sounded like that of a parrot!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DUEL IN HYDE PARK.

It wanted about twenty minutes to six o'clock

"A parrot?"

"Yes, or a cockatoo, that had been taught to speak well. And from a glimpse—only a glimpse—I had of the face, that was like an owl."

"Dreams—dreams! what incongruities they present to us!"

"They do indeed; and now for yours."

"It concerns you."

"No!"

"Yes; in truth it does, although about as absurd as that an owl or a parroquet should come and take my side in the duel."

"Well, well!"

"I thought there was a bright light like a fire, or a blaze of torches, and that I looked from a window in the old Palace—"

"St. James'?"

"Yes, it was one of the windows that look into the Color Court, and who should there look from another window, but the king."

"Ah?"

"Yes, he called out, kill him—kill him! Treason, kill him! on which there was a rattle of musketry, and some one fell dead."

"Some one?"

"Yes, and by the blaze of the torches I saw the face for a moment; and who do you think it was?"

"Go on."

"You, Harold."

"Ha!"

"Yes. I could not be mistaken."

"Well. Be it so."

"But it was only a dream."

"And they, you know," said Harold, with a smile, "go by contraries; so I am not to be shot in the Color Court of St. James's Palace."

"It would be very odd if you were."

"Odd, indeed. But here we are."

They had reached the park, and at about two hundred paces from them, two persons stood close to the "Ring."

"And there are our friends," said the colonel.

"Our foes, rather."

"But what is that yonder, close to the trees?"

"A coach, I think."

"Can we not warn it off?"

"Oh! it is theirs, most likely."

"True—true! Of course it is. There don't seem to be another soul in the park?"

"Not one!"

Ensign Hargraves was at that moment drawn up, as thin as he could make himself, behind a tree; so that he escaped observation.

The colonel and Harold moved on to the "Ring," and when the colonel paused, and Harold went forward without him, the burly form of Major O'Balrigin immediately put itself in motion likewise.

"The top of the morning to ye, sir," said the major; "and it's a mighty great pleasure, sir, to do business with the likes of you."

Harold bowed.

"Is it the colonel, sir, that's quite well this morning?"

"Quite well, sir. And Mr. Charles Beauchamp."

"As fresh as a lark, and as swate as a daisy."

"I am glad to hear it, major. Are you, too, quite well?"

"Niver better, sir. Is that your coach be-yant there?"

"Yes."

"Oh! thin, that's all right."

"Major—major!" cried Charles Beauchamp. "What is the answer?"

"Oh, bedad! thin, I was after forgetting. Mr. Beauchamp, sir, says, that if the colonel will say on his word of honor, as an officer and gentleman, that he was not with Captain Beauchamp in St. James' Square at one o'clock in the morning, on the day mentioned, he will forgive him."

"Major O'Balrigin!"

"Sir to you."

"We come here to fight."

"Good luck to you."

"And fight we will."

"To be sure. Give us your fist. You are one of the right sort, my boy. Whoop, hurrah!"

"What does he say, major?" inquired Charles Beauchamp.

"Why, my dear boy, he's mighty polite, and he says he'll see you—well, he says he'll see you blammed first."

"Very well, we fight."

"To be sure. Come on."

"Now, colonel," said Harold.

The colonel slowly laid his cloak on the green sward, and then took off his coat.

Charles Beauchamp did the same.

The colonel rolled up the shirt-sleeve of his right arm, as he said:

"Is it their coach, Harold?"

"Never mind it."

"Well, it don't matter. I am ready."

The colonel stepped forward, with his sword in his hand, and bowed.

Charles Beauchamp did the same, and then held out his sword, as he said:

"Shall we measure, sir?"

The two blades were placed side by side.

"Not a shaving the difference," cried the major, clapping his hands together.

The adversaries bowed again, and in another moment the sword-blades clashed together.

Delight was in every feature of the major, and he slowly wagged his head from side to side, in the intensity of his enjoyment.

Then Charles Beauchamp made a rapid lunge at the colonel, who parried it, and attacked in his turn, but no mischief was done.

"Beau—beautiful—beauti—fal!" cried the major, as he danced round the combatants in the exuberance of his glee.

Then he ran against Harold, who—it would have seemed to a spectator—took some pains to place himself in his way.

"A thousand pardons, my boy! Bedad, I didn't see you."

"Idiot!" said Harold.

"Sir?"

"Idiot! I say."

"Bedad, sir."

"Oh! if you would like satisfaction—"

"If—I—would—like—satisfaction? Young man, before you are six hours older, or one hour wiser, you will hear from me in a fashion that may not be agreeable."

"Stuff!"

"What?"

"Stuff! I say. Stuff, major, if you are a major, and not some great, fat, awkward impostor. Why not now? Why not now? At once—you have a sword. Draw it, sir—I demand satisfaction of you. I know you, sir. A bully—a brawler by profession—a fomentor of quarrels and tavern brawls! Oh! sir, I know you!"

The major's face turned purple with rage.

"Draw, sir!"

The major uttered a perfect howl of indignation, and tore his sword from its scabbard. Harold was on the defence at the same moment, and they stood foot to foot and face to face.

"Boy," said the major, with concentrated rage in every tone and every feature, "you have gone so far that you must kill me, or I must kill you."

"The former, if you please."

The colonel and Charles Beauchamp were by this time, hotly engaged, and some blood was slowly trickling down Beauchamp's arm, where he had received a slight wound; but this altercation between the major and Ensign Harold could not but reach their ears and eyes, and, both on guard, they stepped back a pace, to regard what was going on between the seconds.

"For God's sake, gentlemen," said Charles Beauchamp, "cease this strife! What does it mean?"

"Hold, Harold—hold!" cried the colonel.

"One or both," yelled Major O'Balrigin, "six feet of turf for one, or both."

He attacked Harold furiously. His boots dug into the damp soil, and the grass was spurned from wherever he trod; and now and then he uttered an unearthly sort of yell of rage, as he gained ground on his young adversary.

Harold gave way step by step.

Step by step, in the direction of the trees, where stood the coach.

The major pressed on him.

"Hold, gentlemen!" cried Charles Beauchamp. "This is madness! What can possess you both?"

"You bleed, *ar*," said the colonel.

"Only a scratch."

"Look to your guard, then."

"Ah! and you to yours!"

Their swords again clashed together.

And still, step by step, did Ensign Harold lead his big and burly antagonist toward the coach; and when about ten paces from it, he paused.

"Now!" he said.

There was a flash of his sword-blade, a rapid parry, a feint, and then a lunge, and right through the broad chest of the major ran the thin blade, till the hilt stopped its further progress, and struck with a dull sound upon the bone.

"Gash! God! Ah! blood!" yelled the major.

Harold put up his foot and thrust the body off his sword; and as it came gleaming forth with hot blood raging after it, the major uttered a scream, and fell dead on the green turf.

"Through the heart," said Harold. "That cry proclaims it. Now, for the other!"

The coach door was at that instant mysteriously opened from within, and Harold sprang into the vehicle.

•The door was closed again.

Once more had Colonel Blanchard and Charles Beauchamp paused and stepped back, each a pace, as the death-cry of the major came upon their ears.

It would have been impossible to feign indifference to the terrible result of the impromptu duel between the major and Ensign Harold.

And there stood the two principals in that already blood-stained contest, alone together to fight out their quarrel, or then and there to end it as best they might, if it were possible so to do, without further strife; and had the quarrel been one of an ordinary character—had it been a dispute bearing about it any of the common characteristics of such matters, a few brief and conciliatory words might have brought it to an end.

But such could not be.

Those two men had met upon a ground of disagreement that admitted of no condonation. The colonel must either divulge the fearful secret which sat so heavily at his heart, or he must fight to maintain it.

Charles Beauchamp must either consent to let the fate of his brother rest in doubt forever, or he must pursue this contest with Colonel Blanchard—who, to his mind, was proved to be the last man seen in his company before he disappeared.

And so they faced each other still.

And each kept on his guard.

And the blood still trickled from the wound in the arm of Charles Beauchamp.

"Sir," said Colonel Blanchard, for he was more anxious, feeling that he was wrong, to forego the contest than was Beauchamp, the challenger, "sir, you will perceive that we are now alone?"

"I do, sir."

"Then, if we fight still—"

"If, sir, say you?"

"Yes. I was going to say, if we fight still, we do so in contravention of all established rules, for we fight without seconds; so that, if an accident should happen to either of us, the other would be placed in an ungracious position."

"Sir, we began with seconds; and if those seconds desert us on business of their own, it is no fault of ours."

"Be it so, then!"

"On guard, colonel—on guard!"

Charles Beauchamp seemed to be resolved to bring the protracted contest to an end, one way or the other, now, as quickly as possible; and the fight between him and Colonel Blanchard took more the character of a continuous contest than it had yet done.

It was evident that whoever gave the next wound to his adversary, would have the best of the battle.

Colonel Blanchard felt that, and the love of life came strongly over him. He fought valiantly. Once again he touched Charles Beauchamp with the point of his sword, and blood showed itself.

Charles did not speak, but he made a rush forward in attack.

The colonel parried the fierce lunge, and then Charles Beauchamp gave ground.

Colonel Blanchard pursued him too closely, and his foot slipped upon the damp grass. For an instant the sword lost its guard. Then he felt as though a red-hot iron had touched him, and he was aware that the sword of Charles Beauchamp had passed through his right shoulder.

The colonel sunk on to one knee.

"Speak!" cried Charles, with the voice of an avenger, "speak! it is for my brother I ask you!"

"Killed—killed! I knew it!"

"Speak, I say! Where is my brother?"

"Help—Heaven!"

"You will not!"

"No; not in this world!"

"Then precede me to the next, where, when I come, I will yet question you!"

Charles Beauchamp drew back his sword, and was about to plunge the weapon through the heart of the colonel, when the latter, exhausted by the loss of blood he had sustained, fell flat upon his face on the grass with a deep groan.

Then, with a rush, some figure, that Charles Beauchamp only saw for the first moment like a cloud or a vision before him, reached the spot; and, placing one foot over the prostrate body of the colonel, the figure interposed a long, bright sword between Beauchamp and his antagonist.

CHAPTER XV.

THE DREAM REALIZED.

The sword of the new arrival on the scene of contest rang with a sharp, jarring sound on that of Charles Beauchamp; and, as it did so, a voice—at once so strange and unnatural that it made Charles Beauchamp feel a cold sensation to his inmost heart—broke the stillness.

"No!" said the voice; "his time has not come!"

Charles Beauchamp looked up. Wonder was the dominant expression of his countenance. It was not a human face he saw before him, but that of some hideous bird—an owl—fearful in its shape and aspect, and glaring at him from the large, round eyes, which seemed to flash with strange fire, and to paralyze him by their gaze.

"Good Heaven! what monster is this!"

"I am he who avenges, as well as he who saves. Charles Beauchamp, your time has come!"

"My—time!"

"Yes; you would have slain this man. Those who slay with the sword will perish by the sword!"

"Who? and what?"

"It matters nothing. Look around you. It is your last look of earth!"

Even as he spoke, the Owlet strode forward another step, and Charles Beauchamp retreated.

"Help! This is some fiend!"

"Now!" said the Owlet.

He dashed down the guard of Beauchamp; but he did not, at the moment, take advantage of his state.

"Craven heart!" he said, "will you die without a struggle even for life!"

These words recalled the fainting spirits of Beauchamp, and he rallied and stood on his defence.

"No, no," he said; "I am no craven; and were you the arch-fiend himself, I will fight with you!"

There was a loud clash of swords, a cry, and then Charles Beauchamp fell upon the green sward, bathed in his blood.

"It is enough for the time!" said the Owlet.

As he spoke, he dashed toward the coach; and, springing in it, at once set off at a mad gallop. How it was guided—how the pair of powerful horses that drew it were kept in check—would have appeared a great mystery to any one who, from even a short distance, had seen that coach making its way; but an accurate observer, who might have been enabled to take a closer observation, would have seen that it was driven from the inside, and that the reins passed through the open front window, and were in the hands of some one within the vehicle.

And now that we have related the events of that blood-stained field of battle, on which there seemed to be three corpses, it is necessary that we should pay some attention to the only other person who had been a spectator of any of the events which had taken place with such startling rapidity.

The young subaltern, Hargraves, who had placed himself behind a tree as closely as he thought he could venture to go to the "Ring" without being discovered, had seen, with sentiments of surprise and terror, all that had occurred.

But until the Owlet had made his appearance upon the scene of action, this young soldier did not think that he was justified in interfering.

No actual unfair conduct had appeared, either on the part of the colonel, or on that of his opponent. It was still man to man.

He considered, too, that let the issue of the original duel be what it might, he could, at its termination, easily step forward and say: "I saw all this, and no one is to blame but the seconds, who, for some personal quarrel of their own, which seemed to have grown with the suddenness of a tropical tornado, choose to fight with each other."

But the appearance of the Owlet on the scene had altered the whole aspect of affairs.

No sooner did the young officer see that he made an appearance and bestrode the apparently dead body of Colonel Blanchard, than he felt he ought to interfere.

To be sure, he was too far off to see who or what it was, except that it appeared to be a man in a half-military half-fanciful costume, and with a cap and feather, who then made himself the champion of the possibly killed colonel; but he ran forward with what speed he could make, shouting as he went:

"Hold, gentlemen! Hold! This must not be! Hold, I say!"

But the fight was over before he could reach the spot.

Charles Beauchamp lay on his back, bathed in blood, and the Owlet was off and away.

Such, then, was the state of affairs, when the subaltern reached the spot of the encounter, and he at once saw that he could do nothing without assistance; so, on the chance of some one hearing him, he shouted aloud:

"Help! Ho! Help! Ho! Help! Help!"

There was no response. Hyde Park was by no means as populous then as it is now. There might not, especially at that early hour, be any one passing for a long time.

"I must run to Knight's Bridge," said the young subaltern, to himself. "I shall get aid quicker than by waiting here."

Even as he made this determination, he heard the beating of drums and the clangor of martial music.

The subaltern cast a keen glance around the confines of the park; and then, winding up from the Bayswater Road, he saw a line of glittering horsemen.

"Troops," he said; "I will claim their assistance."

He ran in the direction the troops were coming; and, when he reached a mound, he thought he should be seen if he waved a signal for assistance; and he did so, with his handkerchief.

"Ah!" he said, "they come this way. That is well. I see the advance-guard opening the gates. They are about to cross the park."

Some gates, that would obstruct the way of horsemen or carriages were opened, and the cavalry of the Guard began by threes to enter the park.

Then the young subaltern saw a string of about six carriages; and he knew that no carriages but those of the royal family were permitted to drive over the green sward of the park.

"It is the king returning to town from Kew," he said. "Ah, there will be plenty of help, now."

The band, which was a mounted one, began to play the national anthem.

"God save the king!" cried the young subaltern. "Yes, it is the king; and here is the vidette. Help! Hallo! Help! Help, here!"

A couple of troopers rode up.

An officer, apparently dispatched in haste from the royal cortege, rapidly followed them.

"What is amiss, sir?" he said, to Hargraves. "What is the matter, that you cry for help loud enough for his majesty to hear you?"

"It is not for myself. You see I am in the service."

"The Coldstreams, I think."

"Yes, sir. Yes, colonel—"

"General."

"I beg pardon—I am so confused."

"An officer, sir, should never be confused."

"Pardon me, sir—even you would, if you had seen what I have. But that is not the question. Yonder lies Colonel Blanchard—killed, I think. By his side, nearly, lies a gentleman who has fought with him; and, further on, lies Major O'Balriggin—killed, I think; and I should not be at all surprised to find Ensign Harold Blanchard lying somewhere, in the same condition."

"Then, sir," said the general, "it appears to me that there has been a wholesale slaughter, and that I may congratulate you upon being the only survivor."

"No, sir—no. I had nothing to do with it."

By this time, the carriages of the king and his suite had reached the spot, and another officer rode up, and said:

"His majesty wants to know what has happened."

"This young gentleman seems to know all about it," said the first officer. "It's a serious affair, I fancy—some mad-headed duel."

"Indeed, general."

"Yes. First file, dismount. Follow me."

The general dismounted himself; and a trooper took charge of his horse, while he and a file of men went forward to where the bodies of Colonel Blanchard and Charles Beauchamp were lying.

Then His Most Gracious Majesty King George III. thrust his head out of the carriage-window, with all that impetuosity which was incidental to him, and called out, in those unmistakable tones of royalty:

"Eh? What? What is it? Eh? Murder! No. Yes. Eh? Who is it? What is it?"

"Come and answer his majesty," said the second officer. "You are in the Guard?"

"Yes—the Coldstreams."

"Come on, then."

Hargraves was, in another moment, executing a very low bow at the carriage-window of the king.

"Well, what, eh? Speak out. Dumb, eh? Are you deaf and dumb? Can't you say—eh? What is it?"

"Please, your majesty, a duel."

"Eh—what? Now. Look sharp. Stray shots—might come this way—pop! bang! you know, and there's an end of us—eh?"

"Gott Gracious!" said the queen.

"Duel! Duel! Eh? Where? Keep our head out of the way—eh? Was challenged once ourselves, a long while ago. Wouldn't fight, though. Oh dear, no! Great rascal—eh? No. By no means."

"The duel is unfortunately over, may it please your majesty."

"Unfortunately—eh? A good job. No more stray shots—bang! Pop! and away you go. Eh?"

"And I fear, your majesty, that four persons are killed."

"What?" roared the king. "Four—four?"

"Yes, your majesty."

"Drive on—drive on! Don't like the sound of it! Do you hear, Charlotte? Four persons killed. Might kill us. Drive on!"

"Gott gracious!" said the queen.

At this moment, the general officer who had been first sent to know what was amiss, and who had dismounted to make his own observations came up to the carriage-door, and said:

"May it please your majesty, Colonel Blanchard, of your majesty's Guards, is badly wounded."

"What—eh? What, our Colonel Blanchard? Owes me a guinea, I think—somebody owes me a guinea."

"But he is not killed, your majesty. Then a young gentleman is just alive, and no more, who appears to have fought with him."

"Rascal—rascal! Eh? Serve him right!"

"And, your majesty, a Major O'Balriggin, unattached, is killed outright!"

"What—what—what?"

"That is all, your majesty."

"All—all! Enough, too, we think—enough, too. Eh, Charlotte?"

"Mine Gott! Yes?" said the queen.

"Take them up. Bury the wounded, and send the dead to the hospital or somewhere; no, I mean—bless me!—the dead—what do I mean?"

"I have seen to all that," your majesty.

"Very well. Drive on, then—drive on!"

"But, your majesty," said Hargraves, "I have the most curious part of the whole affair yet to relate to your majesty."

"Eh? What? Stop—stop! What is it?"

"I had nothing to do with the duel, your majesty; but suspecting one was about to take place, I followed the colonel and his second; and I saw that the colonel was down, and that another person came, and fought and killed his opponent."

"Who—who? Eh?"

"I don't know, your majesty."

"This note, your majesty," said an officer, "has been placed in the hands of one of the escort by a man on a black horse, who then rode away at a prodigious pace toward the country."

"What—what?"

"It is addressed 'to the eyes of all whom it may concern.'"

"Odd address—very odd! Open it—open it, general; open it at once. Well—well!"

The general opened the note, and read aloud:

"If the mysteries of this morning require elucidation, the Owlet will be happy to make them clear."

"The what?"

"The Owlet."

"Drive on!" roared the king; "drive on at once. The Owlet! No—no! Don't want him to make anything clear; too clear by half. Drive on! Murder! Don't want anything elucidated! What—what—what? Rascal—great rascal! Go on at once!"

The royal postillions cracked their whips, and the carriages traversed the greensward of Hyde Park at a rapid pace.

But the general remained behind, and with the assistance of about a dozen of the soldiers, and some of the bundles which were abundant in the park, a couple of rude litters were made; and Colonel Blanchard was placed on, and conveyed to St. James' place.

On the other was placed Charles Beauchamp, and carried to an address which was found on his cards in his pocket.

The colonel was in a deep swoon when he was placed in his own rooms, adjoining the guard-chamber, and the surgeons of the regiment were soon with him.

Then, as if nothing very particular had happened, young Hargraves sat down in the guard-chamber, and called to the orderly sergeant, saying:

"Has Mr. Harold Blanchard come back?"

"No, sir."

"When he does, say to him that I must speak with him at once."

"Yes, your honor."

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MARRIAGE AT ST. JAMES' SQUARE.

It was about one hour past noon on the morning after his mysterious lodgement in the house in St. James' square, that the tall, narrow door in the wainscot opened into the room that Gerald Alton occupied, and the mysterious man, whom he only knew as yet as the messenger of pardon to Alice, entered the apartment.

There was a frank and cordial smile upon this person's face as he said, in his quiet, gentle way:

"I owe you apologies, Gerald, for seeming neglect of you; but, in reality, I was engaged on business of yours."

"Of mine, dear sir?"

"Well, of Alice's; and I fancy I may call that business of yours—may I not?"

"Oh yes—yes! There is nothing that can concern her that does not lie very close to my heart."

"Of course—of course. And now I have something to ask of you before I communicate to you the information I have become possessed of."

"My whole heart and mind are open to you. I will answer you frankly, ask me what you will; for I feel assured you are the sincerest of friends."

"It is well," replied the Owlet. "It is well, indeed, that you should have that assurance, for it is one, that may stand you in good stead in the time that is to come, Gerald Alton."

"I have but one hope in the time that is to come," said Gerald, with kindling enthusiasm, "and that is, that I may be spared to Alice, and Alice spared to me. Oh, sir, if I could but look forward to the felicity of residing in some humble home, some lowly cottage nestled in roses, and with, perchance, a rippling stream to carry on its breast the shedding leaflets, with Alice by my hearth, how happy, happy I should be!"

"Then your tastes are not for admixture with the great world about you?"

"Ah! no—no. I would tend, perchance, a few sheep; I would be cunning and curious about plants and flowers, and the wild birds should all know that our little domain was a shelter and a home for them from all

perils. The slant rays of the setting sun would close my day, and I should rest in peace; its earliest beams would rouse me to a new day of calm delight. I would sigh for nothing else."

"And would you be heedless of the war of interests about you? Of the politics of Europe—of the world?"

"All heedless should I be, while they left me peace and love."

"Peace and love," said the Owlet, as he paced the room twice. "Peace and love. I had peace and love. But now—now! Oh! hush, proud heart. It may not be. The strife for power—the war of factions. Well. It is well. I, too, have had such dreams of Arcadian simplicity and serenity."

"Then he turned abruptly to Gerald, as he said, with a faint smile:

"Why, my dear friend, you would be a monarch, in your home of delight. You would need to be addressed as a serene highness."

Gerald smiled.

"I have heard that title ill-bestowed upon the most restless minds the world ever saw. But I am sincere in what I say."

The Owlet smiled again, and laid his hand, in a kindly manner, upon the shoulder of Gerald, as he said, gently:

"I don't think, my young friend, that there are ten years of age between us; but, during those ten years, I have drank deep draughts of the world's philosophy, and I can tell you that you dream of a Utopia which, in this world, is not to be discovered by any voyager. No, Gerald, we are all of the world, worldly, and we must play our parts in the great drama of existence."

"Indeed, sir."

"Yes; and it is not permitted that any of us should have the power to stand aside, and say we will only be spectators."

Gerald sighed.

"But be comforted. As happy a destiny as that which you have pictured to yourself—at least, as serene a one—may be yours, and yet you may fulfill the role of your existence."

"I will hope so."

"And now, tell me, have you, of yourself, nothing to add to the simple story of your life and of your love?"

"Nothing—nothing."

"And, to the best of your belief, has Alice nothing in the way of mystery to add to her recital?"

"Nothing—nothing. Ah! you do not know her. She has no secret chambers in her brain in which to hoard up mysteries. Her mind is like one of those flowers, so simple in its organization, that at the first gleam of kindly sunshine it opens all its sweetness to the balmy influence."

"It is well. Let me think. And yet, why should I be hidden and secret? I have something to tell you, Gerald, of Alice."

"Of Alice? Of my Alice?"

"Even so."

"Then let her hear it. Let it be told in her presence."

"Nay; it is no charge against her."

"I did not, for one moment, dream it was, sir. If there be anything that I know not about dear Alice, it must be something that, like fresh fragrance to the rose, can only add new lustre to her excellence."

"O faith! faith! what a glorious heritage art thou!" exclaimed the Owlet.

"Yes; I have faith in Alice."

"And I, too, my friend. We will go to her. Come; no doubt she will be found in her own apartment. Follow me."

It was with eager steps that Gerald followed the mysterious man through the tall, narrow door in the panel; and, with a cry of joy, he was soon aware that he was in the large and costly room to which he had been at first introduced in that mansion, and Alice advanced from one of the deep-recessed windows to meet him. "Dear Gerald!"

"My Alice!"

The Owlet smiled.

"Come," he said, "to business; unless, indeed, you will tell me that the only business of such young hearts as yours is, to love."

"Nay, sir," said Gerald, "we will attend to you."

"Then Alice," said the Owlet, "I have, in a few brief words, to tell you who and what you are."

"Ah, sir—"

"But I will love you still," said Gerald.

The Owlet smiled again.

"There were two fair sisters, Alice," he said, "who belonged to a once very rich and very haughty, noble family, although it had met reverses in the many social, and political, and religious revolutions of England. One of those sisters married a king's son. The other married the brother of an earl. But the earl himself was married."

"What earl, sir? Will you not give us names?" said Gerald.

"I will. The earl was the Earl of Morton; and it was the younger sister who was married to his brother, who was named Captain the Honorable John Morton."

"And the sister who married the king's son?"

"We have nothing to do, at present, with that part of the family. It is of this sister who was wedded to the earl's brother I would speak."

"We listen, sir."

"The earl himself was married, and three children of his stood in the way of the succession of his brother to the title and estates. The brother, then, feeling that he was shut out from all hope in that quarter, went abroad, and died in an obscure skirmish between the Turks and the Moldavians. His infant daughter he had left in England, with a faithful servant."

"But the wife—the mother?" said Alice.

"She had died young. The child was an orphan; and it so happened that, within one month of her orphanage, a contagious disorder swept away the three children and the wife of the Earl of Morton, leaving him a widowed and childless man. His mind sunk under these calamities; and before he could take any steps about his affairs, he became lost to this world in permanent insanity."

"Does this poor earl still live?"

"He does. Then a branch of his wife's family, represented by a man named Esperance—Sir Bernfide Esperance—set up a claim to the care of the lunatic earl and his vast possessions. Court interest favored him, and he is now in actual possession of the estates that belong to the brother's daughter—for the grants of nobility carry the titles to heir female, and the titles carry the estates."

"And what became of her?" said Gerald.

"Her life was thrice attempted by Sir Bernfide Esperance, and the faithful servant became so alarmed for the safety of her charge, that she concealed, even from the girl herself, the secret of her birth and rights; and, having many documents which would fully prove her case, she carefully hid them, fancying that nothing could be done, or ought to be done, until the child was one-and-twenty years of age."

"O Heaven!" cried Alice.

"You begin to see?"

"I do—I do—"

Gerald turned very pale.

"She hid these documents," added the Owlet, "in a small valise, and flung it, with its precious contents, into a deep-dug well."

"At Corfe Castle, in Dorsetshire?" exclaimed Alice.

"Yes."

"Then, then, O Gerald!"

"Alice! Alice!"

"You are the child," said the Owlet; "you are the daughter of that noble lady and of the brother of the Earl of Morton. It is your life that Sir Bernfide Esperance has sought."

"And then," faltered Gerald, "Alice is—"

"The Countess of Morton, in her own right, so soon as the breath of life has departed from the poor mad earl, her grandfather."

"Good Heavens! O Alice!—no, I mean lady—"

"Gerald."

Alice went toward him and placed a hand on each of his shoulders.

"My Gerald, am I not still your Alice? Do you reject me now?"

"Reject—you—you, Alice, who are noble—high—great—rich—"

"And yet your Alice, who will love you all the same."

A flush of tears came to Gerald's eyes.

The Owlet spoke in a tone that showed that he was fully amenable to human emotion.

"You will now comprehend," he said, "why it was that the vile plot was formed against your life by the accusation of stealing the diamond bracelet, which the stern and blood-

thirsty laws of England make a capital offence."

"Oh yes, yes; I am so innocent. I did not take it. I did not dream of such a thing."

Alice sobbed aloud.

"Be comforted. Heaven will work in its own way, dear girl. Avengers will arise. They have arisen."

"They have, indeed," cried Gerald, as his cheek flushed and his eyes sparkled. "I will not sleep—I will not eat, drink, nor rest until I have met that man face to face, and charged him with his villainy. I can, too, corroborate all this. I have heard it all. Listen to me, you, dear sir; and you, my Alice, listen!"

"You have some news, then," said the Owlet.

"I have—I have."

Gerald then related the particulars of his visit to the jeweler's workshop, and the conversation he had overheard between Mr. Ambrose and Sir Bernfide Esperance. And then he sprang to his feet, saying:

"Oh, sir, lend me or give me a sword, and let me at once seek out that man."

"He has been sought."

"Sir?"

"And you are avenged."

"Avenged? How?"

"He may be picked up by now; but the last I saw of him was, lying in his blood on Barnes' common: my sword placed him, for a time at least, out of the way of doing active mischief."

"Oh, sir, how can I thank you?"

"Is he dead?" said Alice.

"I know not; but I got from him this letter, which is from your father, dear child, to his brother, the earl, and which contains an account of his marriage with your mother—and so is valuable collateral evidence."

"My poor father!" sobbed Alice.

The Owlet handed her the letter, and her tears fell on the faded writing.

"Sir—sir! will you let me keep this?"

"It is yours. I am glad to be able to place such a document in your hands; and now that you know who and what you are, will you still wed this jeweler's apprentice?"

Alice smiled, and held out her hand to Gerald. The tone in which the Owlet had spoken was not an unkind one, although the words made Gerald redden to the roots of his hair.

"Ought I—ought"—he said, in a half-choked voice—"ought I to take to myself this fair hand, which would be a prize for the highest and noblest?"

"Ah, Gerald!" said Alice, "will you even now refuse me? You do not love me?"

"Alice! Alice! What dreadful words!"

"Come, come," added the Owlet. "That is all managed. Let us have no coquetting. Your name, now, is Alice Morton. So, if Gerald has the requisite papers, your marriage can take place this day, and I will put you into formal possession of this house—or, at least, of that part of it which you will please to inhabit."

"And we shall owe all this happiness to you, sir," said Gerald. "Oh! how can we repay you?"

"You can be of great service to me by inhabiting this house as Mr. and Mrs. Alton, which I wish you, for the present, just to call yourselves; and if any inquiries are made here, you will be able to meet them fairly. I have friends who visit me here, but those friends will seem to visit you; although you will see them but seldom, still there might come an occasion when you would be able to do me infinite service by seeing those friends; but all this to you, at present, is mysterious and vague; and I regret that it must, for a time, remain so."

"We will do all that you wish, sir," said Gerald, "and we shall still think that all too little to show our gratitude to you."

"It is well. It is well. I will not be unmindful of your interests, Alice. In due time your claims shall come before the proper tribunal."

"It will be an affair for the Privy Council, sir," said Gerald.

"It will; and the king presides there when he pleases; so you shall trust to the king."

There was a peculiar smile upon the face of the Owlet as he spoke.

"Stop. Sir—sir!" exclaimed Gerald.

"What is it, my friend?"

"I quite forgot about a scrap of paper that

I found at Mr. Ambrose's, concealed in the very bracelet which poor, dear Alice was accused of stealing."

"What is it?"

"This, sir."

"Ah! let me see it. Good Heavens!"

"You are ill, sir?"

"No—no."

The Owlet had staggered back and sunk upon a couch. He looked fearfully pale.

"You faint, sir."

"No; I—am—better now. *Adela Salisbury, married Oct. 5, 1735 (see cabinet, right hand king's own chamber); died August 1, 1736.*"

The Owlet read these words on the slip of paper that Gerald had found in the bracelet, with such an intensity of interest, that they seemed to take away his breath.

Both Alice and Gerald looked at him in some alarm; for it was only very slowly that his color came back to him.

"Does that paper, dear sir, awaken any recollections?" said Gerald.

"Recollections?" gasped the Owlet.

"Or does it concern you in any way, sir?"

"Does it concern me? It is my life—my crown. Hush! What am I about to say?"

"Sir?"

"Tell me again—again tell me how and where you found this paper. Let me listen to the minutest detail."

The Owlet hid his face in his hands, while Gerald again described exactly how he had found the slip of paper concealed in the bracelet.

Then, with a deep sigh, the Owlet spoke.

"Yes," he said—as he paced the room, and seemed to forget for a moment or two that he was not alone—"yes; that bracelet must have been Adela's. Ambrose was the court jeweler—I see it all now. Oh, chance—chance! O Father in Heaven! how strangely you work in human affairs! This is indeed a most unlooked-for discovery."

"Then, sir," said Gerald, "that scrap of paper does interest you?"

"Interest me! It is life to me. Unconsciously, you have done me such a service that it is impossible I can ever repay it."

"Indeed, sir, I am rejoiced!"

"And I—and I. There is no obligation on your part, let me do what I may for you; and I hope that I shall have the power to do much—much—far more than your wildest dreams, Gerald, can ever picture! The information contained on this scrap of paper at once condenses, simplifies, and renders easy what before was full of difficulty, and full of peril and uncertainty. I am, in truth, much beholden to you, Gerald Alton."

It was evident that these words gave great satisfaction to both Gerald and Alice.

"Soon," added the Owlet, "you will better comprehend all this. At present, Gerald, I leave you for one hour, by which time I dare say you will be able to find a Protestant clergyman to unite you to Alice, if you will not think that the Abbé Deplesis can suffice."

"The Abbé Deplesis, sir?"

"Yes. That is the ecclesiastic whom you have seen, Gerald; I did not know him."

"No—no. But that is his name."

"I would rather have the Protestant clergyman."

"And I, too," said Alice.

"Be it so. God forbid that I should begin now to be intolerant. Be it so. I have, Alice, a sister, whom you shall be introduced to. She is a young and artless girl, and you will find her friendly and kindly disposed toward you. She has been living in solitude for some time, and I am happy to give her such a companion and friend as yourself."

"But, dear sir," said Gerald, "as yet we have not even a name by which we can call you."

"I am Mr. Harold Blanchard, of His Majesty's Coldstream Regiment of Guards, at present."

"At present?"

"Yes, at present. Good-day. I shall be with you both again in one hour; and do you, Gerald, find a clergyman. The house is open now, at the front facing the square, for you to go in and out at your pleasure, and the servants will recognize you as their master."

With a kindly smile, the Owlet left the room, and the door was not closed after him.

It was with wonder and amazement that, after a brief conversation with Alice, Gerald went down to the hall of the house, and found

there everything arranged like a well-appointed residence.

A hall-porter dozed, as is the custom of hall-porters to do, in a large leathern, half chair, half watch-box. Various servants, in a crimson livery, were about, and they all seemed to have been shown Gerald somehow; for they saluted him respectfully as master of the house.

And all this was so surprising that, more than once, Gerald trembled as he reverted to the idea that all was but a dream of unusual distinctness, from which he might at any moment awaken, to find himself in his attic at the jeweller's in Ludgate Hill.

But he went for a clergyman, and found no difficulty, on production of his rescript from Doctors' Commons, and within the hour there stood in the crimson and gold drawing-room in St. James' Square the bridal party.

The Owlet led in the young girl he had brought from the cottage, in the wild, neglected garden, and in a courtly fashion introduced her.

"My sister," he said, "who is ever pleased to know my friends, and to make them hers."

Alice was delighted at the first glance with this young girl, and received her joyfully.

Then the ceremony was performed, and Gerald and Alice were man and wife.

It was exactly twenty-six hours from the period when Alice was in the death-cart, under the cross-beam at Tyburn, from which she was to be suspended, to the present time; and now she was a bride.

From a condemned criminal—from the most hopeless condition that it appeared possible for any one to fall into—she emerged, rich, happy, married, and with apparently a life of happiness before her. Who shall despair?

CHAPTER XVII.

THE WOUNDED COLONEL BLANCHARD.

It was toward sunset on that same day, when the Owlet had done so much for the happiness of Gerald and Alice, that he, in his uniform as a subaltern in the Coldstream Guards, walked leisurely into the soldiers' guard-room, to the left of the arched gateway of the old building.

"Sergeant—sergeant!" he called.

"Yes, your honor."

"Is it true what I am told, that neither Mr. Charles Beauchamp nor Colonel Blanchard are dead?"

"Quite true, your honor."

"Oh, I am delighted!"

"Mr. Beauchamp, your honor, is out of danger, they say; but not the colonel."

"Alas!"

"No, your honor. It is a bad wound."

"My poor cousin!"

"But all don't die, you know, of bad wounds. His honor, they say, has asked for you."

"I am glad to hear it. You see, sergeant, I was the colonel's second."

"Yes, your honor."

"And no sooner had the colonel engaged with Mr. Beauchamp than Major O'Balriggin, who was Mr. Beauchamp's second, forced me into a fight with him, and I was compelled to kill him, or be killed myself."

"Yes, your honor."

"So I ran him through; and then, at that moment, I thought I saw the colonel kill Mr. Beauchamp; and, as we had agreed that, if such was the case, I should go into hiding a little time, till all was settled off, I went."

"Yes, your honor."

"But a kind friend has brought me word of the real state of affairs. So here I am."

"Yes, your honor."

"And that is the whole story, sergeant."

"Just so, your honor."

"And now as I don't suppose anybody cares a jot whether old Major O'Balriggin is alive or dead, I will go and see my cousin."

"No, your honor—yes, your honor."

The sergeant formally saluted Harold Blanchard, and stepped aside, and the ensign walked up stairs to the officers' guard-room.

No one was there.

"Ah! he will be alone," said the Owlet.

"In good truth I hope he is not badly hurt. I shall, I hope, be able, most fully, to recompense him for all he has suffered, both mentally and physically, and I will do so. He, too, like my friends, Gerald Alton and Alice, will find great changes."

The Owlet very slowly and silently opened

the door that led from the officers' guard chamber to the private rooms in the occupation of the colonel.

And there, immediately on the other side of the door, he found the soldier-servant of the colonel, who drew himself up and saluted the Owlet.

"Oh, that is you, Stephens?"

"Yes, your honor."

"How is the colonel?"

"Moans bad, your honor."

"I am sorry to hear that."

"He asks for your honor."

"Then I will go to him at once. Is he alone?"

"Yes, your honor."

The Owlet found that it was in the third room of the suite that the colonel had been removed to; and he was lying on a camp-bedstead, apparently half-asleep, by the character of his breathing.

This room, which will form other and important appendage to incidents which we shall have to relate in full, deserves a description.

It was the third one, then, of the suite which was in possession of Colonel Blanchard, as commanding officer of the Palace Guard.

The first of these was a private sitting-room, of which we have already given some brief account.

The second room was a dressing and accoutrement room, in which the arms, uniforms, and private property of the colonel were kept, and into which no visitors were ever shown.

The third was the room in which the wounded colonel was now lying, and which was of the same size as the second room.

This apartment, the aspect and appearance of which we wish to fix in the mind of the reader, was about twenty-two feet square, and had two windows that looked into the "Color Court" of the palace; that court, in the centre of which there is now a post, with staples and rings in it, through which the flag-staff of the colors of the regiment of Guards on duty at the palace can be placed.

The walls of the room were of very dark oaken paneling, and the roof was shaded so as to imitate a dome shape, and some allegorical subject had been painted in the centre—nothing of which remained very clearly but a sprawling figure, which might represent some goddess, or a court beauty at the period of the Second Charles.

Exactly opposite to the door of entrance to this room was another door, with similar gilt moldings and gilt furniture; but the key-hole was a blank, and, to all appearance—although the door looked as if it would open—it was merely there for symmetry, as it was on one side of the chimney-piece, and there was another door on the other side exactly alike, which did open.

The other door, though, only disclosed, when opened, a deep cupboard or closet, with shelves and pegs—and, in fact, in every way adapted as an armoire or wardrobe.

The chimney-piece was of fine statuary marble, and very elaborately carved.

The floor of the room was covered with plain crimson cloth. The windows were shaded with crimson silk curtains, but woefully faded. The furniture was of the same description as that in the outer room, but more faded and out of repair.

Indeed, it would seem these superior parts of the palace were furnished with the cast-off finery of the principal rooms, whether adapted for them or not.

And yet the apartment had a rich, and not altogether unhandsome look; and had it not been for the low ceiling—which is a radical defect all over St. James' Palace—the room might have looked palatial, and even grand.

Opposite to the two windows was the camp-bed of Colonel Blanchard.

This bed had no hangings; but half-surrounding the head of it was a very beautiful and costly Indian screen, of six leaves or compartments, which, if fully opened, would suffice completely to surround the camp-bedstead, with the exception of the foot of it.

On a small table, that had been gilt, and the top of which was a very costly slab of marble, of the veritable *verd antique*, and which was placed close to the head of the bed, stood several bottles and glasses, containing medicaments prepared for the sick man.

One very beautiful jug of blue ware, that was of a most charming tint, evidently held

some cooling drink, which he was to take freely—for a glass, three parts full, stood close to the jug, and within his reach.

The sword of the colonel, with its belt trailing on the floor, was laid across another table; and about the room was a variety of small articles—partly for the toilet and partly connected with the arms and appointments of an officer of rank.

The Owlet had opened the door of this room so softly, that, if indeed the colonel were sleeping, the sound would not disturb him; and as by the regular and deep-drawn breathing of Colonel Blanchard the Owlet considered that he was in a state of repose, he stood about two paces within the room, after closing the door very carefully, and looked, with an expression of great interest, about him.

What it was exactly in the fashion, shape, appearance, or appointments of the room that so deeply interested him, would have been difficult to say.

Twice, then, he turned completely around, so that no corner of the apartment escaped his scrutiny; and then he went forward and listened attentively to the low breathing of the wounded colonel, who still slept.

It was that kind of sleep which follows the exhaustion of a wound, and which, on the field of battle, is so often the sleep of death.

Not a word did the Owlet speak, even in a whisper, to himself; but, holding up his sword carefully, that it should not trail or strike against the floor, he now approached the bedside of Colonel Blanchard, and looked fixedly at the pale face of the wounded man.

There was blood upon the coverlet of the bed, and upon the pillow; and a faint, blueish tint was upon the forehead of the colonel.

The Owlet shook his head, as if he had, in his own mind, very great doubts about the possibility of his recovery; and then, for the first time, in a faint whisper, he spoke:

"It must be soon," he said, "or these apartments will belong to another—for, should he die, he will be removed from the palace at once, as is the custom with every one who dies within its precincts. Yes, it must be soon!"

Being satisfied, then, that Colonel Blanchard slept, the Owlet walked softly across the room as foot could fall, and placed his hand upon the lock of the door, which was on one side of the chimney-piece, to balance that of the cupboard on the other.

The handle was a fixture.

Then the Owlet carefully examined this door, looking up and down the sides of it, and scrutinizing it in every possible way; for he seemed to have a doubt in regard to its absolute artificiality.

Those doubts, however, at length yielded to the fact. The door was a mere imitation. There were no hinges; there were no means of opening it any more than any other fixed panel of the wall.

The Owlet shook his head, and then nodded, as though his mind was quite made up on the point.

His next movement was to the cupboard on the other side of the chimney-piece.

That door was easily opened. It created, however, a little on its hinges.

The Owlet then took from his pocket a small bottle, and from it poured a few drops of very limpid oil over the hinges, and the creaking ceased.

Then he took a long and curious survey of the inside of the closet, and carefully passed his hand over the shelves. One only of them was loose, and could be lifted out.

It was a heavy shelf; and before lifting it, which he had every inclination to do, the Owlet stepped back into the room, and bent low down, with his hand behind his ear, to listen to the sleeper.

All was still.

Then the Owlet slowly and carefully lifted the shelf off the side-brackets that supported it. The shelf was so strong and heavy, that the side or edge of it was about two inches in width.

Where the edge next to the paneled wall of the closet had touched, a piece of crimson cloth was glued, or otherwise fastened, all along, which would make the shelf fit tight, and exclude dust from coming on to it from the back.

This bit of crimson cloth was very accurately put on, and was exactly the width of the edge of the shelf.

The Owlet carefully ran his finger along it. All was hard beneath it, until he got to within about four inches of the end of it.

Then his finger sunk a little.

There was some hollow or hole there, behind the piece of crimson cloth that was so well fastened to the wall.

"Ah!" said the Owlet.

The sound broke the stillness of the room.

"Who? Who—is—it?" said Colonel Blanchard, faintly.

The Owlet in a moment replaced the shelf, and noiselessly closed the closet door.

"Some—one—surely spoke," moaned the colonel.

"It is I, dear friend," said the Owlet, as he stepped forward to the side of the couch.

"Ah!"

"Do not be alarmed. I come to see how you were. I found you sleeping, and looked from the window until you should of your own accord awaken.

"Harold?"

"Yes; I am Harold! Are you very much hurt? I sincerely hope not. How do you feel now?"

"I hardly—know. But the fellow's sword must have been—have been—"

"What would you say?"

"Red hot! Red hot!"

"It is the inflammation of your wound that makes you think so."

"Yes, I suppose so; I suppose so, because it would not have been possible."

"Certainly not."

"My foot slipped."

"No doubt."

"And the villain took me then at disadvantage. It was so very—very—"

"Very what?"

"Strange that all the dream came true! Your dream, you know—not my dream!"

"Indeed!"

"Yes. You went off I don't know where, after, as I thought, killing that major."

"I did kill him."

"You really killed him?"

"I did. He forced me into a fight with him. I fancy it was his intention so to do from the first, but I could not avoid it; so it became a question of him or me; and as I soon made up my mind about that, I ran him through the heart, and there was an end."

"Ah!"

"But what were you saying, colonel, about a dream?"

"Not my dream, but yours, you know."

"Well."

"Drink! Oh, give me some of the drink! It is on the table. I burn with thirst. I feel certain now."

"Certain of what?" asked the Owlet, as he held the glass to the colonel's lips.

"Certain that his sword was red hot."

"Oh, that is all imagination, my dear colonel—mere imagination! But about this dream; what was it?"

"Do you not remember the Owlet? Well, I slipped, you see, and Beauchamp, with the red-hot sword, although how he kept it red hot I don't know, but he was on the point of taking my life, when some one strode over me and crossed swords with him."

"Indeed! Is it possible?"

"Yes, I saw the face for a moment. It was like an owl exactly—exactly."

"You surprise me, colonel."

"It was so; or I am mad!—mad!"

"Then it was really this strange being with the face of an owl who saved you?"

"Yes, from another thrust which he (Beauchamp) would have given me; and he killed him, I think."

"No. He is badly hurt, but not yet dead."

"He suffers?"

"He does."

"Ah! and I suffer, too. I wonder if the Owlet's sword was red hot!"

It was at this moment that the Owlet heard voices in the outer rooms, and he paused in his discourse with the wounded colonel to listen.

CHAPTER XVIII.

MR. AMBROSE IS SENT ON A DANGEROUS MISSION.

It was about half-past five o'clock on the morning of the marriage of Gerald and Alice, and likewise on that morning when the Owlet paid his visit to the wounded colonel at St. James' Palace, that a violent knocking at the door of Mr. Ambrose, goldsmith and jeweler, on Ludgate Hill, awoke that wealthy and re-

spected (consequently) citizen from his slumbers.

There are some folks who are always uncomfortably affected by any unusual noise or unusual visitor—and Mr. Ambrose was one of these folks.

Pale and trembling he sprang from his bed, and opening a window on the second story of his house, he looked out into the street below.

A throng of persons were there. He could see the dirty-white great-coats of the watch, and some half-dozen people seemed to be speedily surrounding a sedan chair.

Bang! bang! bang! went another appeal to the knocker of Mr. Ambrose's door: for the people below did not see his head, adorned with a nightcap, protruding from an upper window, as he had not yet spoken.

Now, however, that his fears were a little assuaged, and that he did not think the people below came on an errand for his arrest, he gathered heart to speak:

"Halloa there! Halloa! What is all this?"

"There he is!" cried half-a-dozen voices at once. "There he is!"

This sudden recognition of him awakened again all the fears of the jeweler, and he was silent.

"Mr. Ambrose—sir—sir!" cried one from below. "If you please, worshipful sir!"

The guilty jeweler took courage again—for those words were far from menacing.

"What is all this disturbance about?" he cried. "It is vexatious that a respectable citizen should be roused from his bed in this way!"

"But, sir, it is a gentleman! and as he is killed, he asked to be brought here, you see sir."

"A gentleman?"

"Yes, sir."

"But if he be killed, this is not the proper place to bring him."

"He is not dead, sir," said another; "and he says his name is Sir Bernfide Esperance, and he has been set upon by thieves or by murderers, Mr. Ambrose, and nearly killed."

"Good gracious!—that is quite another thing—I will be down in a moment!"

The jeweler did come down; upon sallying out at his door, he saw that the sedan chair had been opened, and in it, looking much more like a corpse than a living man, sat Sir Bernfide Esperance.

His lips were white and ashy; his eyes blurred and blood-shot, and his apparel all disordered and soaked with gore. He could not speak.

"Good Heavens! how has this happened?" said Ambrose.

By a great effort, Sir Bernfide Esperance raised one of his hands and pointed into the house. There was no such thing as mistaking the gesture. He wanted to be taken in; and as the jeweler would much rather he was in his house than in any other—considering what perilous secrets they had together, and that he was in a dying state—he made a virtue of his convictions, and cried out:

"Certainly—of course—of course! God forbid that I should hesitate for a moment in affording any possible aid and shelter to any one who is hurt, whether they be friends of mine or not. Bring him in, my men—bring him in! He shall have bed and board with me!"

The wounded man was duly brought into the house, and carried up stairs to a spare bed-room; and then, as Mr. Ambrose wished to keep a character with everybody, he was quite liberal in his rewards to the men who had picked up Sir Bernfide on the common, and brought him to Ludgate Hill.

"He could speak when we found him, poor gentleman!" said one of the men. "And the only thing he said, was: 'Take me to Mr. Ambrose's, on Ludgate Hill.'"

"You were quite right to bring him here. I will see that he has every possible attention."

The men departed very well pleased; and Mr. Ambrose at once sent for a surgeon, who dressed Sir Bernfide's wound, and then shook his head, saying:

"Three days will decide it."

"Will he live?" asked Ambrose.

"The chances are a hundred to one against him."

"But he has the one chance—"

"He has. The police ought to be informed!"

"My dear sir, I am, as you know, an alderman and a magistrate, so I will see to that."

"True—true. I wish you good-day, sir, and will send such medicaments as the poor gentleman's state requires; but above all things he must not speak."

"Very good, sir."

"Must he not speak?" said Mr. Ambrose to himself, when the surgeon had gone. "That is just the very thing that he must and shall do!"

Mr. Ambrose then sought the bed-side of Sir Bernfide Esperance, and having closed the door of the room, he said close to his ear, in a low tone:

"How has this happened? Is it an accident? or does it in any way concern our plans?"

Sir Bernfide made a terrible struggle before he could speak; and then he said, faintly:

"Concerns us."

"Oh! How?"

"He—he—"

"Who?"

"The dev—"

Mr. Ambrose started.

"Owlet!" added Sir Bernfide.

"Who?"

"Owlet!"

"You don't mean that the celebrated highwayman who goes by that name has wounded you?"

"Yes!"

"To rob you?"

"Too much!—knows—too much!—all."

"He knows all?"

"Yes!"

"The—villain!"

Sir Bernfide just had strength enough left to stretch out one hand, and to clutch the arm of Mr. Ambrose, with a painful intensity.

"It—it may be my—death—to speak, but I must—I must!"

"To be sure—go on!"

"You must go—to—to—Corfe—Castle to-night—to-night, and get the small valise—at the bottom of the dry well—dry well, and bring it—bring it—"

"Here?"

"Yes—or all lost!—lost!"

"I will—I will."

"You—safe—while you have—have—"

"You mean that I am safe while I have that?"

"Yes! They must—terms with you."

"My dear friend."

"Then you must go to—asylum and tell him—settle the earl at once—you see—settle him!"

"To be sure I will."

"Then if I live—you see—I shall live if you send—send to Antwerp for Soljeuin Bergheim."

"Who?"

"Doctor—chemist—conjurer."

"Oh!"

"Get him—he cure me! I—earldom and estates—you half—sign paper! Save me! That's all!"

"I comprehend, my dear friend. You will, if I do all that you require, give me one half of the Morton Estates; and you are willing to sign any paper to that effect that I please?"

"Yes!"

"Then depend on me."

"Yes. Send—Antwerp. Bergheim—chemist. Everybody knows him. Quick! Vessel! Expense nothing! Say for me—write letter! He will come—rogue!"

"My dear Sir Bernfide, all that you have ordered shall be done. In about two days and nights, I have no doubt, the man you name can be brought from Antwerp. I will, within one hour from now, charter a fast vessel in the Thames, and dispatch her."

"Do—one half—so help—God!"

"My dear Sir Bernfide, don't swear it. I will have a proper deed drawn up for you to sign, which will be much more satisfactory."

"Yes."

"Good-bye, now. Keep yourself quiet, and all will go well."

"Yes."

The jeweler was as good as his word. The promise of one half the vast estates of the Mertons was a bait that he was sure to snap at; and he knew that, with the death of Sir Bernfide Esperance, all further chance of fingering a single guinea more than he had already acquired on that affair would be at an end.

It never struck him that should Sir Bernfide recover, and sign any deed, however

stringent, that he would give him half the estates, he would think no more of cutting his (Mr. Ambrose's) throat, to get rid of the obligation, than he would of peeling an orange.

The fast sloop was sent off to Antwerp, in search of the Dutch surgeon in whom Sir Bernfide had such faith; and Mr. Ambrose then made ready for a journey into Dorsetshire on that evening, and calculated that, if he used great diligence, he might reach Corfe Castle somewhere before daylight on the next morning, by partly availing himself of public conveyances, and by partly riding on horseback the latter portion of the road.

But Mr. Ambrose was not at all aware that there was an attentive listener to all that had passed, in the person of poor Timber, the charity-boy.

Now, Timber had seen the crowd of people come with the sedan-chair up Ludgate hill, and had seen them stop at the jeweler's door. One glance had let him know who it was that was brought there in so deplorable a plight.

When, then, Timber heard Mr. Ambrose express such hospitable intentions in regard to Sir Bernfide, he, Timber, ran round to the court, and got into the house by that way; and, knowing well that there was but one room in the house in which there was a spare bed, Timber got at once under that bed, as the best place he could be in, to get well-informed of all that took place.

No sooner had Timber fairly ensconced himself under the huge, old bed, than Sir Bernfide Esperance was brought in and placed upon it.

Thus Timber heard all that passed; and, when Mr. Ambrose left the room, he crawled out from under the bed, and after shaking his clenched fists pantomimically toward Sir Bernfide, he made his way out of the house, and ran toward St. James' square.

But as he ran, poor Timber recollected that it would not be until nine o'clock at night that he would have an opportunity of seeing Gerald Alton with his news.

What was he to do?

The only place where he, Gerald, could be found, was at the railings of the square garden, so far as he, Timber, was informed.

"What is a cove to do?" said Timber, as he rubbed his head under the little muffin-cap.

Timber was tolerably ingenious and fertile in expedients, but he could not convert seven o'clock in the morning into nine o'clock in the evening.

"Well," said Timber, to himself, after a few moments' reflection, "I will wait here till he does come. He may live about here, and so he may come past; so here goes, and here I waits."

Timber then, with great agility, mounted to the top of a post, and there he sat, with his yellow and wasted legs dangling before him, and his metal badge on his breast patent to all beholders.

Hour after hour passed away, and there sat Timber.

To be be sure, a perpetual sort of skirmish—sometimes with words and sometimes with stones—was kept up between him and boys who passed. He was informed, at least fifty times, that he was a "charity brat," and asked, deridingly, what he would take for his leather smalls.

But Timber kept his post.

And the day waned; and Gerald Alton was married to his own dear Alice; and, with her hand clasped in his, he stood by the window of the mansion, and looked out upon the world, which wore so different an aspect to him now to what it had ever done.

Then suddenly he started.

Alice looked alarmed.

"What is it, dear Gerald?"

"One moment, dearest. That boy!"

"Boy?"

"Yes, on the post. He is a friend of mine, and wants me, I am certain."

"It is Timber," said Alice. "I know him now. He was at Mr. Ambrose's."

"Yes—yes, dearest. It is Timber; and I am certain he waits for me. Timber! Timber!"

Gerald Alton had opened the window, and stepped out on to the balcony of the house. Timber heard him, and, with a cry of joy, he clapped his hands together, and sprang off the post.

"Halloa!" cried the hall-porter—as Tim-

ber, in his full parish costume, made his way into the hall of the mansion—"Halloa! what do you want?"

"Gerald! Gerald!"

"Eh!"

By this time Gerald had made his way down into the hall, for he rightly guessed that poor Timber would find some difficulty in passing the Cerberus at the door.

"Ah! there he is," said Timber, as he saw Gerald, with a smile on his face, advancing to meet him, "there he is!"

"Yes, Timber, I am here; and I fancy you have something to tell me."

"Lots," said Timber.

"Come this way, then, and you shall see an old friend, who, you will be glad to see, is much happier than when you last saw her."

"Then it is that dear Miss Home."

"Yes, but Miss Home no longer. Follow me, Timber."

"Yes, dear Gerald, I will—I will; but there is no time; indeed, there is no time."

"For what, Timber?"

"I will soon tell you. Stop here. Let us sit down on the stairs. They are quite as fine as any room. Let us sit here, Gerald, and I will tell you all about it."

Gerald smiled, but he took Timber by the arm, and led him into a small room on the drawing-room floor, and seated him in the deep recesses of a comfortable chair, and then he said:

"Timber, you are pale."

"No breakfast, and I think, too—do you know, Gerald?—that it is now dinner-time, too."

"It is, indeed, Timber."

Gerald touched a bell, and ordered the best that the house afforded for Timber, who was so struck by the silver plate, on which the viands placed before him reposed, that his appetite almost forsook him.

"Come—come," said Gerald; "eat—eat freely, my dear friend."

"He calls me his dear friend!" said Timber. "O Gerald, I hope—I—I—"

"You hope what?"

"No matter; oh, of course, it's all right. What does the copy-book say? 'The pewter platter of honesty is better than the gold dish of—'"

"Timber! Timber!" interrupted Gerald.

"Can you, for one moment, suspect that these comforts and these luxuries that you see about you, are come by in any other way than honestly?"

"No—no," replied Timber. "It's all right. What's that, Gerald?"

Timber pointed to a deeply-cut decanter, in which glowed and sparkled some rare golden Spanish wine.

"Wine, Timber?"

"I've heard of it."

"And did you never taste wine?"

Timber shook his head.

"Then do so now."

Timber tossed off a glass of the bright fascination; and then he said, with a look of wonderment:

"Hurrah! But I don't think much of it. Oh dear! oh dear! what a wretch I am!"

"A wretch?"

"Yes. Let me tell you. There's that Sir Bernfide, half dead, as he is, at Mr. Ambrose's; and Mr. Ambrose is worse than he is, I can tell you; and somebody—that is, the old earl, as they call him—is to be settled; and Mr. Ambrose is to go this very night to Corfe Castle, and to get something out of a well; and a ship is to go to Antwerp for—ah! I thought I should—I should never be able to recollect his name; and you see I was under the bed all the time, and heard all about it, dear Gerald. It makes me wink."

"Wink? Why—how?"

"The wine I mean."

"Oh, that is nothing! But, indeed, Timber, the news you bring is most important."

Gerald touched the bell again, and when a footman appeared, he said:

"Is Mr. Blanchard within?"

"No, sir!"

"I am here," said a voice, at this moment; and the Owlet, with a calm smile upon his face, appeared at the door of the room. "I am here, Gerald, and have just come in from duty at the palace."

Timber looked as if some vague idea of making his escape had come over him, but Gerald laid his right hand upon the coarse serge collar of the charity coat, as he said:

"This is a good friend of mine."

"He is very welcome, I am sure, then," said the Owlet.

"He brings news," added Gerald.

The Owlet and Gerald then stepped into the recess of a window, and the latter rapidly repeated the intelligence that Timber had brought respecting the state of affairs at the jeweler's house on Ludgate Hill.

"The villains!" said the Owlet. "We must defeat all that. I thought when I had put that rascal, Sir Bernfide Esperance, out of the way of any active personal villainy for a time, that the matter, as connected with the valise, said to be at the bottom of the dry well at Corfe Castle, would keep a little."

"But you see, sir, that villainy never sleeps."

"Well; and we will not sleep. I will own that I am more than busy with other affairs at present, but yet I will not neglect this matter. Let me speak to this poor boy who has brought the news?"

"Yes. He will tell you all truth. I would trust his word fully."

"He has an honest face, poor fellow!"

The Owlet turned toward Timber.

"Come, my boy," he said, "tell me what you think the wounded Sir Bernfide Esperance wanted Mr. Ambrose to do for him."

"To send for the doctor in a ship; to go to Corfe Castle and get something out of a well, and to kill the old earl!"

"One, two, three things."

"That's it."

"And you think he was to do those three things in that exact order?"

"Eh?"

"I mean that he was to do those things, one after the other, as you have mentioned them."

"I am sure of it."

"Then he has sent the ship to Antwerp? So it is too late to stop that if we wished; and it is of no consequence, if we could. He has started, too, by this time, for Corfe Castle, so he cannot be prevented from that journey but the next best thing can be done."

"And that, dear friend?"

"That is to let him go, and get the valise which, I have no doubt in my own mind, contains the legal evidence of the marriage of the Honorable John Morton to Alice's mother; and then intercept him and take it from him, even at the door of his own house, whither he is quite certain to take it."

"Ah! yes," cried Gerald, "that will be the thing to do; but the poor, mad Earl of Morton must not be allowed to fall a victim to these villainous men."

"He will be quite safe, you may depend, if they find the valise not in their possession. I do not think, after all the time that has elapsed, that they would commit an aimless murder. Besides, while Sir Bernfide Esperance is in the least dread of Alice finding friends and evidence to substantiate her claim to the title and the estates, it is more to his interest to keep the insane earl alive. It would only be in the event of his finding that he had forever quenched Alice's claim, either by her death, as he tried to do, or by himself having possession of the only documentary proofs that could serve her, that he would feel the earl to be in his way."

"I see—I see."

"Leave all to me, then. This is Wednesday; and let this man Ambrose make what speed he may to Corfe Castle and back: he cannot see Ludgate Hill again until very late to-morrow night."

"That would be to be quick indeed!"

"It would; but I will give him credit for every speed and every facility on his journey, and you may safely leave the matter to me."

"With all the confidence in the world."

"It is well—it is well. And now, my friend, you are aware that—although you occupy the whole of this house seemingly—there are apartments at its back, which can be reached by the route you know of by the way of King street, which I still hold in my possession."

"Ah, sir! is not the whole house yours? Do I not feel that I and dear Alice are the creatures of your bounty, and that you have treated us like a king?"

The Owlet smiled.

"You think so!" he said.

"We both think so. Our utmost gratitude, and our most eager wishes to meet your views in all things, will not express a tithe of what we feel."

"It is well. Let me add, then, to what I was saying, that you must not feel surprised if you should, from this portion of the premises which you occupy, hear any sounds indicative of the presence of people in the back part."

"I will not."

"They will be friends of mine."

"That, then, is more than sufficient."

"I thank you with all my heart."

"But how fain would I aid you, sir! Whatever may be your objects, and I am sure they are good ones."

"They are *legitimate*!" said the Owlet, with a stress upon the word.

"Of that I am certain; and I was about to say that I hope the time will come when you will have sufficient confidence in me to allow me to be of assistance to you."

"I have that confidence now; and you are of assistance to me—of very great assistance—of more than you know of. Besides, have I not, through you, secured the happiness of one near and dear to me?"

"Of Alice?"

"Yes. But time presses now, and I am sure you fully comprehend me. Adieu for the present, and trust this affair of the valise and of Mr. Ambrose solely to me. I will see to it in every particular."

The Owlet left the room and the house again, and Gerald turned his attention to Timber.

"My dear Timber, you shall now stay here, and share with me my good fortune."

Timber shook his head.

"Not yet, Gerald—not yet. It's better, you know, for me to go back to Ludgate Hill. Perhaps I may be able to bring you some more news, you know; and now that I know where to find you, I can come to you at any time."

"You are right—you are right; but, so soon as all these affairs are over, which complicate the fortunes of dear Alice, then, Timber, you shall no longer be the slave of any one; but, as my friend, I will see to your fortunes."

Timber wrung the hand of Gerald, and dashing his hand across his eyes to clear the clustering tears from them, he manfully balanced his muffin cap on the side of his head, and set off for Ludgate Hill.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE CONSPIRACY.

Twelve o'clock had just boomed forth from the many church-steeple of London. The deep tones of St. Paul's had formed the base of the chorus of sounds, while some lagging clocks in the suburbs, with a faint, high treble, were the last to make proclamation of the midnight hour.

It was an intensely dark night.

Dense masses of clouds had, from about nine o'clock in the evening, swept over the sky, and they had thickened and accumulated until they almost seemed to rest upon the chimney-tops of London.

The lazy old watchmen woke up, and with dizzy, half-somnolent steps, paraded their several beats.

"Past twelve, and a cloudy night."

That was the cry of the so-called guardian of the night, whose duty it was then, and even for many years afterward, to proclaim both the hour and the weather.

Only it not unfrequently occurred that the so-called guardian of the night took a longer nap than usual, and woke up some two or three hours later than he thought it was, and at three or four o'clock in the morning would howl out his:

"Past one, and a foggy morning."

The fog, too, would be in and about his own eyes and brain.

But those were rare times for the midnight burglar—for the footpad—the street-thief, and even the assassin.

The watchmen were made conspicuous, so that they might be seen by all evil-doers from a distance—as if the object had been to warn them just to get out of the way, and to suspend operations for a few moments.

These watchmen, then, were old, superannuated paupers from the various parishes. Their attire consisted of an immense great-coat, made out of a coarse material as thick as a blanket and, when new, about the color of one.

This coat effectually prevented the watch-

man from moving much quicker than a man with the gout.

Then—in order to keep out the night-air—the watchman himself had a thick, woolen night-cap, pulled right down over his head and ears.

This effectually prevented him from hearing anything short of a twelve-pounder fired at his side.

In one hand he carried a huge lantern; in the other, a thick bludgeon. Round his waist, attached to a cord, was a rattle.

Voilà the English watchman, to whom the property and the lives of the sleeping inhabitants of London were intrusted, up to the year 1830 or thereabouts.

These old men were all called "Charley." Why, no one seems to be aware. Perhaps, when it is discovered by some philologist why an ass is named Neddy, the discovery of the reason the old watchmen were called Charley may be eliminated from the same researches.

It was twelve o'clock on that September night in old London; and the watchman of that district took his meandering, half-stupid, dozing way, down King street.

The King street which was at the back of Gerald Alton's fine house in St. James' square.

"Past twelve o'clock, and a cloudy night. Eh? Who are you? Move on?"

"My dear friend," said a mild voice, in most gentle accents. "Mr. Smith thinks you must feel cold."

"Eh? Move on."

"And he has sent out for you this dram."

"A dram?"

"Yes, dear friend. He says that it is a sad thing to awaken in the night, and feel that a respectable man—a man who has seen better days, and nights too—is abroad, and calling the hour, with nothing to drink."

"So it is—so it is. He's a gemman he is. Mr. Smith is he?"

"Yes."

"And the—a—dram?"

"It is here in this bottle."

"Good!"

"You will find it so without a doubt."

"All's right. Here's his health."

"Good night."

"Good night, sir. Past twelve, and a cloudy—it is good—night. Past—strong, too, it is—twelve, and a clou—Ah! it's the right stuff—dy night. Dear me—how—very—sleepy—I do feel. Past night, and a cloudy twelve—no—a cloudy clock. Eh? Move on there! Move on, will you! You ob-nate. Oh! it's only a post—a—a—post. Past—Smith, and a cloudy—dram. Ah!"

The watchman slid down by the side of a post, at the corner of King street.

The bottle, now empty of its dram, rolled into the kennel and broke.

The watchman slept.

The clouds above now opened a little. The darkness of the night was not quite so intense, and a soft rain began to fall.

Then a tall figure, muffled up in a red-colored cloak, made its way into King street, and marched with long strides toward the little door in the garden or stable wall, through which Gerald had first been introduced by the Owlet.

A peculiar tap was given to the door, and it was opened on the moment. Some one word was uttered, and the tall figure glided in, and the door was shut.

Hardly had this incident taken place, when another figure, muffled, if possible, still closer in a cloak, appeared in King street, and, after glancing around suspiciously, made its way toward the same small door. But before this second person could tap with his knuckles for admission, a third appeared in King street, and reached the door hurriedly.

A few words passed between these two persons before the door was opened.

"I am glad to see your grace," said the one who had reached the door first.

"Hush!—hush!" said the other.

The door was opened.

"Crown!" said he who had said he was glad to see "his grace," and then they both passed in.

The watchman slept profoundly.

Another and yet another man, in cloaks—then two together, and finally no less than thirteen had passed in at the little door, and soft rain fell pattering down, and not a foot-fall disturbed the repose of King street.

No more came.

All was still as the grave. The watchman ceased to make even a slight gurgling sound in his throat.

The watchman was dead. He had taken his last dram. It was no longer a cloudy night to him.

And now from the gloomy and rain-bedraggled exterior of that mysterious house, we will step into an interior that has all the appearance of the most profound caution and mystery.

A large room, very thickly carpeted, and hung all round with cloth, is in the occupation of thirteen men. A very dim lamp suspended from the ceiling sends sickly-looking rays upon the faces and the apparel of the persons grouped beneath it. They have not cast aside their cloaks wholly, but they are no longer so muffled up in them as they were, and beneath those cloaks may be seen plain, but rich as regards quality, apparel.

They, one and all, wore swords; and from the bulky and irregular set of some of their vests, it might be supposed that some of them had concealed fire-arms.

A round-table was in the room, covered with a cloth of crimson velvet. Paper, pens, and ink were in profusion on this table.

The chairs in the room were fifteen in number. There were thirteen of crimson velvet, with gilt frames; there was one all plain black cloth; there was another, on the back of which was a gilt royal crown, which just gave it that additional height above the others.

A faint buzz of conversation was going on among the thirteen persons there assembled. It was so subdued that it sounded—taking into consideration the peculiarities of the English language—like a half-suppressed hissing, with only now and then a deeper tone mingled with it.

A door then opened noiselessly, and a portion of the cloth hangings were drawn aside.

The priest, who had been named as an abbé by the Owlet to Gerald, glided rather than walked into the room.

"Ah!" said one, "here is our friend, the abbé. How are you, abbé?"

The priest bowed low.

"I have the honor, my lord, to be quite well," he said.

"That is right. We should miss you, abbé, as our able secretary and clerk of council."

"You are very good, my lord."

"It gets late," said another.

The abbé seemed to be counting the members present, for he then said:

"Thirteen—all here. I was not quite sure but that only twelve had come."

"No, monsieur l'abbé," said one; "we are all here."

"I see it is so, your grace."

The abbé then left the room, in the same way by which he had entered it, and the cloth hanging settled down behind him.

Then there was a pause in the whispered conversation among the various persons assembled, and a general drawing together around the table.

About three minutes might have passed away in mute expectation, and then from one portion of the room the cloth hanging was abruptly drawn aside; and a low, but clear, voice said

"The king!"

With a firm, quick step, the Owlet entered the room.

The thirteen persons bowed low, and then stood in respectful silence.

"My lords," said the Owlet, "be seated."

He then himself sat in the chair which had the covered and gilt crown at its back; and the thirteen persons present took seats around the table.

The abbé glided in again, and took a seat at a small table, a little apart, on the black chairs.

"My lords!" said the Owlet, "now that we are in privy council assembled, and all present, we have an important communication to make."

The thirteen persons bowed their heads; and then one said, with great respect:

"We surmised, by your majesty's summons, that the circumstance was one of no small moment."

"You are right, my lord duke," replied the Owlet. "It is of no small moment; and I cannot help thinking that you will all perceive in it the special aid of Providence."

The thirteen heads were all again bowed.

"That clear and irrefragable proof existed," added the Owlet, "of the marriage of Frederick, Prince of Wales—the son of his majesty, King George the Second—with the Lady Adela Salisbury, we never entertained a doubt; and that those proofs were among the private papers of the royal family, we fully believed. The difficulty was, to know where to lay hands upon them."

"Nevertheless," said one of the council, "we of your majesty's privy council are quite satisfied, from the documentary and other evidence which your majesty has produced to us from time to time, that such marriage did take place; and that your majesty is the issue of that marriage, and, consequently, the rightful king, by royal and legal descent, of these realms."

"There can be no doubt of that," said another; "the present reigning sovereign—King George the Third, as he is styled—is legitimate enough; but he is a younger son, and half-brother to your majesty, by Prince Frederick's second marriage."

"That is the case," said several. "That is it."

"And, moreover," said one, who had not yet spoken—"since his majesty, whom we have the honor to see now before us, has been brought up in the holy Catholic faith, we, as Catholic noblemen, cannot but feel a special interest in placing him on the throne of his ancestors."

A general expression of assent followed this speech; and then the Owlet spoke again:

"It is so, my lords; and, as we have appointed you all as members of our privy council, and to various high dignities about us, we hope that we shall have the pleasure of confirming these appointments before all the world."

The lords of the council bowed again.

"And so, my lords, we will now state to you what the circumstance is that induced us to call this special meeting of our council. A most extraordinary accident has placed in our hands a memorandum, which we have no doubt whatever was written by our mother, the Princess Adela of Wales, which points out precisely where the proofs of her marriage with our royal father are to be found."

A look of surprised gratification passed over the faces of the council.

"Here is the document," said the Owlet.

He placed on the council-table the little slip of paper which Gerald found in the bracelet, at the jeweler's shop. The council passed it from hand to hand, and regarded it with evident looks of satisfaction.

"Your majesty is evidently favored by Providence," said one; "but still these documents mentioned, or mentioned by implication, in this paper are difficult, if not impossible of access."

"Nay, we have a plan for that," said the Owlet, with a smile.

A small bell at this moment rang sharply and violently, somewhere close at hand.

CHAPTER XX.

THE SPY IN THE COUNCIL.

When the strange meeting in the house in St. James' square, of the pretender to the crown of England and his council was interrupted by the sharp, loud ringing of a bell, there was a general start of surprise, and some appearance of consternation.

The Owlet glanced toward the abbé, who rose in his usual quiet, gliding way, saying:

"It is nothing, your majesty and my good lords. It is, no doubt, one of our emissaries, with some report."

The bell sounded again.

"Are you sure of that, abbé?" said the member of the council who was called "your grace."

"Yes, if the bell sound a third time, your grace."

The sharp tingle of the bell a third time almost mingled with the quiet tones of the abbé's voice.

"There!" he said; "it is a friend. Your majesty will, doubtless, excuse me for a moment?"

The Owlet bowed, slightly.

The abbé left the council-chamber.

A marked silence ensued for some few moments, which was broken by the Owlet saying:

"My lords, as we said, we have a plan

which promises every possible success, and which will put us in possession of those papers which our royal mother has, no doubt, well-preserved, with the hope that Heaven, in its own good time, would render them serviceable to us."

The abbé, at this moment, glided into the room again, and stood as if waiting permission to speak.

"Well, abbé," said the Owlet, "we shall be glad, as we always are, to hear your report."

"It will be in your majesty's recollection," said the abbé, "that it was the opinion of your majesty, and of your council, that the adhesion to your majesty's claims and rights of the French ambassador was a point worth gaining."

"Just so," replied the Owlet; "and, if we recollect rightly, Monsieur l'Abbé, you communicated with the Marquis de Villefort on the subject?"

"I did, your majesty; and as the marquis possessed the same holy and Catholic faith as ourselves, I put to him an oath, that he dared not break, that if he should decline to share with us the peril, if any, and the glory which would be certain of placing your majesty upon the throne of your ancestors, he would keep within the recesses of his own bosom all that I might tell him."

"Exactly, Monsieur l'Abbé. You did warily, as you ever do."

The abbé bowed profoundly.

"The Marquis de Villefort, then, your majesty, as I had the honor of stating at the time, took one week to consider before giving his reply. The week is over."

"Ah, is it so? We guess, then—"

"That Monsieur le Marquis de Villefort is here, your majesty, and craves permission to avow himself your majesty's most faithful friend."

"That is well. What say you, my lords?"

"It is well," said one, "your majesty, because it must be well; but—but—"

"You look doubtful, my lord."

"I feel doubtful, sire. The Marquis de Villefort is well-known as an *intrigant*. He has the reputation of being one of the—the—what do you call those men in Paris, abbé, who believe in nothing?"

"Nay, my lord—"

"Yes—yes; they have a name. Ah, I recollect. They are called, your majesty, encyclopediasts."

"I think," said the abbé, quietly, "they do believe in something. At all events, the mere personal honor of such a man as the Marquis de Villefort would insure his good faith; and, besides, he has everything to gain and nothing to lose by the change of monarchs; and, besides—"

"Well, abbé, what besides?"

"He is here."

There was a smile upon the faces of some of the council, and uneasy looks upon others. The Owlet, however, spoke with an air of confidence.

"Abbé, your last reason is as good as all the others. And there is one thing we must be careful to avoid, my lords, as it is the way in which traitors are most readily manufactured, and that is, we must not let any one see that he is mistrusted."

There was a general and immediate assent to this doctrine; and then the Owlet added: "We will, then, receive the Marquis de Villefort."

The abbé bowed, and left the room.

No one spoke now until the abbé returned, bringing with him the French ambassador, who was perfectly well known to all present. He was received with grave looks and recognitions; and he stepped up to the Owlet, and bowed very low indeed, as he said, in tolerable English, but with that strongly-marked accent which no Frenchman ever yet succeeded in getting rid of:

"I beg to offer to your majesty my most humble and devoted services."

"And we are glad to see you, marquis. What do you think will be the opinion at the Court of Versailles, on such a change as we contemplate in the reigning head of this country?"

"It cannot be, your majesty, anything but all your majesty can wish. The steady descent, through legitimate channels, of all crowns, cannot but be a matter of congratulation to all kings."

"And besides, a profession of the Holy

Catholic faith," said one of the council, "is a great thing on the part of the monarch of this country."

"My lords," said the Owlet, "we would not have you expect too much on that score. We think that the Protestantism of this country is strong to fanaticism, but yet we shall have the opportunity of enunciating such concessions to Catholicism as shall make its residence in this country much more easy than it is now."

"Beyond a doubt," said the French ambassador. His Majesty Charles the Second, who was a sincere Catholic, was able to do much."

"And His Majesty James the Second lost his throne," said the Owlet, "by trying to do more. My lords, we must not let our royal fortunes be wrecked on that rock. We pray you to be seated, Marquis de Villefort, and to make, on this occasion, one of our council."

The marquis looked around.

There was no chair for him.

The abbé then brought his own chair, which was covered with black cloth—and, bowing, he placed it at the table.

"By the next council meeting, marquis," he said, "there shall be a proper chair for you. I perceive you look curiously at this chair. It is one I occupy from choice."

"From choice?"

"Yes, marquis; and I glory in these stains that even show through the covering."

"Stains, M. l'Abbé?"

"Yes, marquis; they are blood."

"Ah!"

"The blood of a traitor. We have had one—and only one—traitor here. He was killed in that chair."

The Marquis de Villefort turned very pale.

"Oh, I can stand," he said.

"Nay, we beg that you will be seated," said the Owlet.

"Your majesty's wishes are commands," replied the Marquis de Villefort, recovering his composure by a great effort; "and but that a faithful friend may have a slight natural reluctance to occupy the seat which is stained with the blood of a traitor, the chair will do right well."

The Owlet inclined his head slightly in assent; and then, turning his observation to a member of the council, he said:

"We will now hear you, my lord."

A man with light, flossy hair, and whose complexion, lips, eyes, hair, and face seemed all alike—white and dusty-looking—spoke, in a calm, cool voice:

"Your majesty and my lords, I am decidedly of opinion that what I am about to propose is a something which, although at first sight it may present to you a repugnant aspect, is still the only plan which will ultimately be found the most humane and the most judicious for us to adopt."

They all listened with evident interest.

"If your majesty should succeed in procuring the important documents your majesty mentions, it would only be by a tedious appeal to the legislature of the kingdom, that anything could be done; and from that moment, England would become a focus of intrigue."

"True—true!" said several.

"Therefore"—added the speaker, slightly raising his voice, as he either warmed with his subject, or gathered courage from the approval that his exordium had produced—"Therefore, what I propose is, that there should be no rallying-point for sedition—no peg left on which to hang treasons and plots, and no name by which evil wars might be fomented."

The speaker paused a moment, and then, amid the intense stillness of the council, he added:

"I propose, then, the death of George the Third, as he is styled."

The Owlet drew a long breath.

The council were silent.

"If he be permitted to live," added the speaker, "England will rue it for many a long day, and blood will be common in the land: He is coarse, brutal, and obstinate. He will see no reason, and hear no reason, why he should be ousted from the throne he now occupies. You will be dealing with a half-madman, who has all the cunning of people in his condition, and all the savagery and brutality of his own mental organization, which is one of the lowest order. I therefore

propose that George the Third be put out of the way of making himself mischievous. What say you, gentlemen?"

There was a whispered conference among the council, and then another spoke:

"It will be hardly sufficient," he said, "to decide that, in the interests of his majesty, here present, and of true humanity, George the Third, falsely so styled, should be put to death. The difficulty will be in regard to the circumstances under which it shall be done."

"Let it be this way," said another speaker, "suppose that the present usurper—for such he is—be put to death, I should advise that his majesty, whom we acknowledge, be there on the spot—in the palace, and that we all surround him, and call upon the Guards to acknowledge him as king, showing the officers the proofs of his parentage and birth. The great officers of state can be sent for, one by one, and when they find what is the state of affairs, and are convinced of the real and legitimate claim of his majesty, their adhesion, I think, will be certain."

"Vote, my lords"—said another—"vote on the question of the death of the present king."

"Nay—nay!" laughed the Owlet, "we are the present king, or the king present."

"I humbly beg your majesty's most gracious pardon. It was a slip of the tongue."

"And so we take it. It is not worth a thought, my good lord, for we know you as a friend."

"Let the vote be taken by ballot," said another.

"Be it so," said the Owlet.

A hat was placed on the table, and the various members of the council tore off from the sheets of paper that were lying before them, like slips, and shading them with their hands from each other, they each wrote a word, and then folding up the little slips, they threw them into the hat.

"Now, abbé," said the Owlet, "we shall see the decision of our council."

The abbé turned all the slips from the hat, and then opened them one after the other.

The word "Death" was on twelve slips. "Life," on one only.

"He is to die," said the abbé.

The French ambassador looked uneasy.

Then the Owlet spoke.

"My lords, all," he said, "I, and I alone, will take care that the decision of this council is carried out."

There was a solemn stillness.

"I alone, I say, will see to it. And, now, my lords, absolving you from all blame or censure on this account, I will request of you, that you meet me on the night of Saturday next."

"Where, sire?"

"At St. James' palace."

There was a visible sensation.

"There is a window," added the Owlet, "which looks into the Color Court. It is the centre one of three, which are at equal distances from each other. They all look to the southward."

The members of the council bowed, to signify that they understood the window indicated.

"Some time," continued the Owlet, "between the hours of twelve o'clock and two, on Saturday night next, I will open that window from within, and cry out: 'Long live the king!'"

"And we," said several of the lords—"we will cry out: 'Long live King Harold the Second!'"

"We shall thank you, my lords; and now, breaking up this council, we leave you to make what adherents and what strength you can, among your several families and connections. Every officer of the army who joins with us shall have his next step in rank, at once; and all civilians shall have such rank and position as befit their several conditions, but all in advance of what they are."

The Owlet rose from the chair with the crown at the back of it, and bowed to the council.

The council all rose on the instant.

"Way for the king!" said the abbé, as he drew aside the crimson cloth, which covered the door by which the Owlet had entered the room.

Another moment, and he was gone.

One by one, then the strange council departed the way they had come, and King street was again deserted.

The dead watchman still leant against the post, and the rain pattered upon his corpse.

The Duke De Villefort walked at a rapid pace toward the French Embassy, which was opposite to the Green Park; and as he went, he opened and shut his right hand, as he muttered:

"I have them all—I have them all now. We shall get our treaty signed, and these heads will all lie low enough. Ha—ha! messieurs, I have you now. It don't suit the Court of Versailles to have a revolution in England now—*sacre, non!*"

CHAPTER XXI.

CORFE CASTLE.—THE DRY WELL.

Mr. Ambrose, the court jeweler of Ludgate Hill, in the good city of London, had quite made up his mind to place himself and his fortunes in the same boat with Sir Bernfide Esperance.

The thousand pounds he had already received for the villainous attempt to bring poor Alice to a disgraceful and awful end at the gallows, had whetted his appetite for further plunder from the magnificent Morton estates.

He resolved, then, to do all that Sir Bernfide Esperance required of him.

But, first, Mr. Ambrose drew up, himself, with much deliberation and caution, a deed, by which Sir Bernfide bound himself to make over to him a clear moiety of the estates of Morton, in the event of his becoming legally invested with them.

This deed he took to the bedside of the wounded man, and placing a pen in his hand, he said:

"Sir Bernfide, this is the legal document which will secure to me the performance of your promise."

"Yes," said Sir Bernfide, feebly "I—will sign."

"Shall I read it?"

"No."

"You take it on faith, then?"

"I do—I do! The pen."

"Then, I assure you, Sir Bernfide, that there is no more in it than is sufficient to carry out our mutual wishes in the matter, and you may sign it without scruple."

"I have no scruples—never had any."

The deed was signed.

"That will do. Sir Bernfide, I thank you."

"The ship?"

"Has gone to Antwerp."

"Ah! The valise?"

"I start for Corfe Castle directly."

"The mad earl?"

"He shall die to-morrow!"

"I am content."

"And so am I," said Mr. Ambrose, as he left the room; and, as good as his word, at once set off for Dorsetshire.

Traveling was very different, indeed, in those days to what it is now, when the rail will whirl a man from London to Dorsetshire, if such be his destination, in a few hours.

Mr. Ambrose could not even get a stage-coach, until quite late in the evening; so, although the expense was serious, he resolved to post to Lymington, from whence he intended to take water conveyance to the coast of Dorset opposite, and so make his way as secretly as might be to Corfe Castle, the position of which he knew tolerably well; and that it was a ruin which stood a few miles inland from a small bay called Studland.

But Mr. Ambrose was not quite aware that he was not the only person who was on the road from London to Dorsetshire that night.

It so happened, that no sooner had Mr. Ambrose left his house on Ludgate to undertake the journey to Corfe Castle, than Jonas Brand, the thief-taker, arrived at the shop.

Jonas looked ill and pale, and he had his arm in a sling, but his tones were as harsh and brutal as ever.

"Hilloa!" was the polite exclamation. "I want Ambrose—where is he?"

There was a shopman of the jeweler named Phillipson, who was remarkable for the suavity of his manners, and he answered Jonas Brand with his perpetual provoking smile, and circumlocution of phrase.

"Why, if you please, Mr. Jonas Brand? And hoping at the same time that you are quite well, sir, and that your arm—your precious arm, as I may call it—is not seriously hurt, although I do see it in a sling, sir—"

A growl like that from an enraged bear came from Jonas Brand.

"I didn't ask you about my arm. I ask you for Mr. Ambrose."

"Well, Mr. Jonas Brand, since, sir, you are rather impatient—and I don't know, my dear sir, and would not take upon myself for the world to say that you have not a right to be impatient—"

This was too much for Brand. He darted his most savage look at the shopman; and, muttering something about there being no necessity to stretch his tongue, but a hope that he might, some day, have the pleasure of stretching his neck, he then passed through the shop; and, assuming the privilege of an acquaintance, he made his way through the door that opened into the staircase—that door and that staircase which Gerald had to watch so narrowly while engaged in listening to the conversation between the jeweler and Sir Bernfide Esperance—Jonas Brand darted up to the first floor of the house.

"Hilloa!" he cried. "Ambrose! Ambrose! Where, in the name of all the fiends, are you, Ambrose, I say?"

Jonas Brand then paused to listen, and he thought he heard a low groan.

"What—what's that?"

The groan was repeated.

Jonas Brand followed the sound. He felt convinced it came from a room on that floor. He pushed open a half-glass door, and was in the bed-room devoted to the use of Sir Bernfide Esperance.

The groan came a third time to his ears, and he strode up to the bed and held aside the curtain.

"Hilloa!"

Sir Bernfide opened his eyes. They were fevered, and a strange glisten was about them.

"Who is that?" he said.

"Me," replied Jonas Brand.

"You? Who—who?"

"Brand."

"Jonas?"

"Just so."

"Ah; You—you?"

"Yes, I. You seem to have been hard hit, Sir Bernfide."

"I am—I am—the Owlet."

"Oh, that's it, is it? Well, there's an end of the little expedition to Corfe Castle."

"No—no, Ambrose."

"Ah!"

Sir Bernfide had said what he did not intend to say, for Jonas Brand was about the last person to whom he would have confided the fact of the journey of Ambrose to Corfe Castle, in search of the valise at the bottom of the dry well.

But Sir Bernfide's mental faculties, usually so keen, were under the influence of the fever that consumed his heart, and he hardly knew what he said.

Jonas Brand, however, had heard enough to guide him, so he said, with a light and jocular air:

"Oh, you have sent him!"

"Him—him? Who?"

"Ambrose."

"Where is he?"

"Why, you have sent him to Corfe Castle, you know, to get the valise and bring it to you."

"No—no."

"I say, yes!"

"No, I say. Jonas Brand, you are wrong."

Jonas laughed.

"Well—well, what does it matter, you know, Sir Bernfide Esperance, so long as you have it?—so long as we have it among us, you know? I am quite delighted that Ambrose has gone for it, because—because you see—"

"What—oh, what?"

"I can meet him there yet, and make him give it up to me."

"To you?"

"To be sure. He is not the kind of man to be trusted by such men as you and I, Sir Bernfide; and so I will take possession of it, and keep it till you get better."

"Oh!"

"That is quite agreeable."

"Yes, quite. Oh, of course! I tell you what we will do, Jonas Brand."

"What?"

"He will bring it here, and then I will send for you to take it away with you."

"To be sure—to be sure! That will be the way to do it. Ha! ha! Good morning! You will soon be well again."

"You think so?"

"Of course, I do. People who are born to be hanged, you know, are sure to get well of everything else. Ha! ha! It's an old saying, but a true one. Good morning, Sir Bernfide: I will call and see you again soon."

Jonas Brand walked, whistling, out of the room, and Sir Bernfide Esperance shook his clenched hand after him, as he groaned out:

"Oh! that I were but as I was yesterday, you should sleep the sleep of death this night, villain that you are; but I shall recover. I shall get quite well, and then, Jonas Brand, look to yourself."

There was a baleful, threatening look about the eyes of Sir Bernfide Esperance, as he half-closed them and sunk back on his pillow again.

Jonas Brand, within twenty minutes of that time, was on a stout horse, and on his route for Dorsetshire. He felt quite convinced that he was preceded by Mr. Ambrose, the jeweler.

And in truth Ambrose had the start of him; but as they went by different routes, Ambrose was not aware that Jonas Brand had got some miles ahead of him.

Ambrose went direct to Lymington, where he proposed taking a boat to Studland Bay.

Jonas Brand rode into Dorsetshire, leaving Lymington on his left.

Money was not an object with Jonas Brand when he was on an errand that might possibly be so profitable a one as the present.

He rode his own horse thirty miles only, and then he put it up carefully and hired another; and so he went on, stage after stage, with a power of endurance that Mr. Ambrose could by no means have competed with, until he got into Dorsetshire by a town named Winsborne, intending to ride to Poole, and there take a boat across the bay toward Corfe Castle.

Jonas Brand had ridden one hundred and forty-two miles in sixteen hours. He had started from London at about half past ten o'clock in the forenoon. He was at Poole, in the neighborhood of Corfe Castle, about half past four on the following morning.

It was a cold, wretched autumn morning—all damp, sloppy, and cheerless—when Jonas Brand rode into Poole, and halted at a hostel in the High street close to the market-place.

Not a soul was astir in the town.

But hostlers and inn-keepers have no objection to being disturbed for customers, and Jonas Brand soon made himself heard. He put up his horse, promised to return in a few hours, and then went down to the beach to see if any fisherman was about, whose boat he could hire to take him over to the bay.

There were boats enough in the creek, but no one who owned them could be seen.

Jonas Brand, however, made a racket against the door of a hut close at hand, and soon roused a poor fisherman, to whom he cried out: "A guinea, my man—a guinea for a cast over to Studland!"

"Ay, your honor, that will be a good morning's work," said the man, "if your honor really means it."

"Here is the gold."

The sight of the guinea dispelled all the fisherman's doubts of such a piece of good fortune; and he roused his boy; and soon the well-made sea-boat was dancing over the waves toward Studland.

"Corfe is close to Studland, I fancy," said Jonas.

"Quite, your honor."

"What boat is that yonder?"

"The fisherman could just see, through the night-haze, a boat with a square sail and jib."

"An early fisher, I should say, sir."

"From Poole?"

"No; from Lymington, I take it, by the look of her, so far as one can see by this light."

"Oh!—ah!—well! No—no. It cannot be Ambrose—I am far ahead of him."

It was Ambrose, though.

The fact was that Ambrose, too, felt that a little money would not be badly spent on the project of getting possession of the valise, which probably contained the papers so essential to the proof of the birth and legitimacy of Alice Home, as she was called.

If Sir Bernfide Esperance did not pay a good price for such documents, she would; and, in any case, they were of immense value to whoever might be so fortunate as to hold possession of them.

Therefore was it that even as Jonas Brand had spared no cost to get to Poole with speed, Mr. Ambrose had spared none to get with expedition to Lymington.

The post-chaise had carried him—take it for all in all—very much about the same rate that Jonas Brand had succeeded in traveling on horseback; and at the very moment that Brand had trotted into the High street of Poole, Mr. Ambrose had set sail in a small fishing-lugger from Lymington.

But there were some cross currents about the coast, which necessitated a long tack on the part of the lugger, while no such necessity existed in respect to the rowing boat Jonas Brand was in.

The consequence was, that Jonas Brand landed at the little Bay of Studland about half an hour before Mr. Ambrose; and he had, therefore, the start of him in the route to Corfe Castle.

It was not much, but it produced rather important results both to Jonas Brand and to Mr. Ambrose.

There is a small village called Corfe close to the castle. This village boasts of an inn, and some little cooped-up places that are dignified by the name of shops, in which, as in country places of such description, every possible thing is sold, that can by any means be supposed to be wanted by the residents of the neighborhood.

To one of those shops Jonas Brand made his way, for he wanted some articles that he had not been able, in his haste, to bring from London with him, and which, had he spared himself time to procure them, would have much encumbered him on his journey.

A long rope Jonas Brand wanted, of sufficient stoutness to support a good weight—that good weight (good only on account of its ponderosity) being himself. Then he wanted some stout hooks and a hammer, all of which things he got—saying they were for a yacht lying out in the bay—at one of the beforementioned shops at Corfe.

Then, just as he found, by consulting his watch, that it was six o'clock in the morning, Jonas Brand commenced his walk up the hill to Corfe Castle.

The castle had held out, during the civil wars of the commonwealth in England, against the forces of Cromwell, in the cause of the king.

It was so hopeless a struggle, that, when it was over, and the castle taken, Cromwell said that royalists should have no future opportunity of giving trouble by holding possession of it; so he blew it up. The thick walls were rent asunder by the blast of powder.

The huge gateway was cleft in two, and one half lifted up some five feet from the other side. The fractured arch remains to this day. In fact, the whole pile was a complete ruin when Jonas Brand reached the top of the mound on which it stands.

The dawn was very dimly to be seen coming, and a cold wind was whistling about the old time-worn and gunpowder-blackened stones of the castle.

CHAPTER XXII.

JONAS BRAND ENDS HIS CAREER.

"How shall I find this old well of the castle?" said Jonas to himself, as he entered the lofty building, and felt himself in a darkness which would not be in any degree dispelled yet for a good hour to come.

To be sure he would have found no difficulty in procuring a guide from the village; but his was an errand that did not afford witnesses, so he rather chose to lose some time in searching for the well, than to bring some person with him who would point it out, and then be too officious in remaining to see what his object was.

Through ancient halls, the ceilings of which had long since departed, and the floors of which were mounded up with rubbish, and weeds, and wild grasses—Jonas Brand took his way; down crumbling old staircases, in turrets that were fearfully off the perpendicular, and across court-yards that had long since been reclaimed by the thistle, the dandelion, and large dock-leaves, from anything approaching civilization.

Still he found no well.

Then he lit a small lantern that he had with him, and after another careful hunt through the ruins he came upon what he thought must surely be the spot he sought.

There was a sort of parapet of stone, and there were the remains of some wooden building which had probably contained a windlass. Yes; surely he had now found the well.

But was it a dry well, as had been said?

That was a question of no small moment. If still with water in it, the search in its depths for the valise would be hopeless.

With his lantern in his hand, Jonas Brand stooped over the little stone coping, or parapet, to make his observations; and then, with a pang of disappointment, he saw that, although there was an evident circular depression in the earth, indicating that there had been a well there, it was now filled up.

This was a discovery that seemed to settle the whole question.

If the well were filled up, easy as that process no doubt had been, considering the quantity of the castle ruins that lay ready at hand for the purpose, it would be weeks of labor before it could be cleared out again.

"That's over," said Jonas Brand.

But there was a gloomy feeling of discontent in his mind that he should have come so far, and ridden so hard for nothing, and he stood gazing at the closed well in deep cogitation.

Then Jonas Brand set down his lantern on the little coping-stone that surrounded the hollow in the ground, that indicated that there a well had been, and drawing the short hanger that he wore, he dug its point as deeply as he could in the green turf.

An exclamation burst from the lips of Jonas Brand—an exclamation of satisfaction.

The point of the hanger had certainly touched some wood-work.

"I know all about it now," he said. "The well is only covered over with planking, and turf has been placed upon that again."

Jonas was right. By removing the turf, he came upon some thick oaken planks, which, by their half-charred ends, showed they had belonged to the castle. They were easily lifted aside. And there was the well.

"Dry or wet?" said Jonas Brand, as, crouching down over the deep, black chasm, he slowly, one by one, dropped some pebbles down, and then listened to the sound they might make.

So still was the old ruin—so hushed was the whole neighborhood, that the slightest reports from below must have reached the ears of that attentive listener.

There was a grim smile of satisfaction on the face of Jonas, as he scrambled to his feet again, and uttered the one word:

"Dry!"

He had no doubt about it. The well was dry, and the descent would be easy enough. But Jonas Brand had heard of foul air congregating in such places, and he knew that it would not be safe to go down until he was assured that the breath of life would be taken from him by nephetic gases. He knew, too, that what will support combustion in the shape of flame, will support life, so Jonas set to work providing for his own safety.

He tied the lantern to the end of the rope he had with him, and he slowly let it down into the well.

As he let the rope go through his fingers, he made a rough estimate of its length by counting it off in feet, as nearly as he could guess.

At the number forty-five the rope slackened.

The lantern had reached the bottom of the well.

Then Jonas Brand began to haul up.

The light was still burning.

"All is well," he said. "Forty-five feet is no great depth to go, and by the light burning I have no doubt that the old well-shaft is ventilated in some way that one cannot see from the top. It will be all right."

His arm that had received an injury pained him a little; but Jonas Brand was a man of great physical endurance, and he would not let it hinder him.

Securely between two of the coping, or edge-stones of the well, he fixed the iron hooks he had brought with him. To them, then, he tied the rope. The lantern he fastened to his waist.

Then down went Jonas Brand.

At the moment that he fairly disappeared beneath the surface, a pale, anxious face peered round one of the old ruined walls of the castle.

A hand, then, and an arm—the hand was clenched—made threatening gestures in the air toward the well. A voice muttered some maledictions.

The face was that of Mr. Ambrose, the jeweler, of Ludgate Hill.

Ambrose had reached the castle about half-an-hour after Jonas Brand, and just as Jonas

scientific experiments in regard to the quality of the air in the well were satisfactorily concluded; so that from that point he had been a spectator of the whole proceedings.

And now, crouched low down—crouching like some huge reptile—Mr. Ambrose approached the spot and listened. He heard strange noises down the well. There came up from its depths a faint, flickering light. A voice, as if from the bowels of the earth, awakened an odd echo in the old ruins.

"I have it," said the voice.

"Ah!" ejaculated Ambrose. "He—has—it."

Boom! At that moment came a morning gun, fired from some ship at sea.

The report echoed in a strange, rattling, disconnected fashion, from hill to hill of the whole line of coast.

"He comes!" gasped Ambrose.

He, with trembling hands, drew a knife—a long, sharp knife—from a sheath that was fitted into a pocket of his coat, made expressly for it. He comes!

The rope was agitated.

The faint light from the well increased each moment. There was a dull, scraping noise. The head of Jonas Brand appeared, but his face was in the direction away from Ambrose; with amazing strength and skill he was climbing the rope. Something was slung around his neck—a valise. Yes; a valise of blackened leather. He unloosened it from his neck. With one hand he tossed it out of the well on to the rank grass.

"There!" he said.

"And there!" said Ambrose, as he with one blow of his knife severed the rope. Jonas Brand wrenched round his head and saw his enemy. Then, with a shriek that echoed fearfully among the old ruins, down he went.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE VALISE REACHES ITS RIGHT OWNER.

In the excitement of the moment—wrought up to a pitch almost of frenzy from fear, as he was, Mr. Ambrose echoed from his own lips the fearful shriek with which Jonas Brand plunged to the bottom of the dry well at old Corfe Castle.

Then there was another half-stifled, agonized cry from deep down in the well—something like a half-wail and half-sob; and the fancy of the jeweler—for he was quite a man of imagination, was Mr. Ambrose—made him think that he heard the splash of bones and blood, and mangled flesh, with which the thief-taker reached the bottom.

And still crouched down in the same attitude in which he had been when he cut the rope, Mr. Ambrose remained, looking pale and ghastly—his eyes staring—his lips contracted, and the knife held up threateningly, as though he thought it possible that Jonas Brand might yet find power and means to crawl up the sides of the well, and engage with him in a combat of life and death.

And that man—that Mr. Ambrose, the jeweler, who could in cool blood join the plot for the destruction of Alice at the hands of the hangman, was appalled because he had himself to be the executioner in the case of Jonas Brand.

His coward soul was all aghast when he himself had a deed of death to do, but he would scarcely have felt a pang if, on that fearful Monday morning when Alice was taken to Tyburn, she had been legally strangled there and then, in accomplishment of the objects of Sir Bernfide Esperance, and for his co-partnership, in which he (Mr. Ambrose) had received a fee of one thousand pounds.

The cold perspiration rolled in large drops from his brow, and the damp of death appeared for a time to take possession of his limbs.

Still he crouched down by the well, with his right arm upraised to strike.

And the dawn came.

The young day—the advent of which had been proclaimed by that gun at sea—slowly stole out of the heavens, and a soft, gray light began to creep about the old ruins of Corfe Castle.

Far away eastward the horizon of waters was dappled with faint colors. Long, cloudy islands of dusky green appeared to rest upon the crests of the rippling waves. Then in flashes there shot over the water brighter tints—some a grayish-yellow, others with a soft, roseate hue, like the inner surface of some

Indian shell; and then a gilt streak glittered and glimmered over the sea, and the first long pencil of sunlight shone upon hill, and tree, and stream, and pebbly beach.

The dawn had come.

Then Ambrose drew a long breath, and looked about him on the ruin, and on a bright streak of light that came through a crack far above his head.

A bird then perched on the topmost pinnacle of the old castle; sang sweetly and twitteringly as it plumed itself in the sun's first rays. One of those glorious days of autumn was coming, which at times redeem the English climate from all its bitterness.

And in the well all was still.

Still as death could be.

"He is dead! He must be dead!" gasped Ambrose. "God! what a cry he gave!"

On the opposite side of the well, just clear of the brink of it, lay the much-coveted valise, all green and yellow with damp and mould. But there it was. And there was he, Mr. Ambrose, the sole possessor of it; and that, too, without having had the trouble, the risk, and the terror of descending the well to get it.

There was deep congratulation in that.

Ambrose tried to smile as he thought of it, but a hideous contortion of countenance was all that he could produce.

Then he inclined his head on one side, and listened at the well's brink.

Not a sound—not a sigh.

Dead! dead!

But he wanted to be so very sure about it, so he looked about him, and presently he saw a fragment of the castle—a large, jagged cornered, awkward piece of rock. It might weigh some hundred and fifty pounds—of course he could not lift it, but he could push it, roll it, propel it, in some fashion, along.

And he did so. Right to the brink of the well.

Then he toppled it over.

With a hideous sort of crash it reached the bottom.

Mr. Ambrose placed both hands over his ears. He was afraid some yell of mortal agony would come up from Jonas Brand, as this rough, jagged piece of rock would grind into his flesh and bones.

No. All was still.

Jonas Brand was past being hurt by pieces of rock.

"Ah!" said Ambrose, "I am satisfied now."

He then began to look about him with some coolness—some judgment, and he soon saw how the well had been opened by Brand.

The idea came strangely across him, that it would be far better for him to restore the well to the state it seemed as if it had been in before Jonas' visit, than to have it thus staring open, with that dead man at the bottom of it. So he set to work.

He replaced the wood-work. He covered it over again with the turf. He removed the iron hooks from between the stones.

Then he patted the whole down as well as he could.

Jonas was buried.

"It's a kind of family vault," said Ambrose. "The world will see him no more."

Then he lifted the valise.

It was a small one—such, indeed, as might without difficulty have been strapped on to a horse's back. Despite the mould and the decay that were about it, there was ample evidence of it having been made in a costly manner. Mr. Ambrose looked at it with intense interest.

A question arose in his mind.

Wouldn't it be better to open it, there and then, and take out its contents, and stow them about him in his various pockets, or take the whole valise, as it was, to town?

He decided upon the latter plan.

"Yes," he said, "it will be better. I will take a good look, though, at what it contains, before Sir Bernfide Esperance shall be aware that I have returned. And now to London with what speed I may. I am rid of that Jonas Brand, too, who was such a pest."

Mr. Ambrose having got over his fright, was beginning to congratulate himself.

The day had come, broad, bright and beautiful, by the time he reached the village, but he passed across a field or two, and avoided Corfe. He had told the lugger to wait for him in the Bay, and he was soon in sight of it.

"All is well—all is well," he said. "All well and all successful. I shall soon be in

London. I feel quite light of heart now with such success."

Mr. Ambrose was getting more decidedly pleased every moment. He was quite forgetting that hideous spectacle at the bottom of the well in Corfe Castle—that man with a jagged piece of rock resting upon him.

He was, in fact, was this jeweler and murderer, quite sprightly and facetious when he reached the fishing lugger, and whereas, on his course to Corfe Castle, he had been gloomy and taciturn to such an extent that the boatmen had thought him some person flying from the law, they now, in his changed aspect, did not know what to think of him.

And so Mr. Ambrose, sitting serene and happy in the stern of the lugger, made his way back again to Lymington.

Then a post-chaise to London was the order at the principal inn; and while it was getting ready, he partook of a capital breakfast.

The valise he had rubbed and scrubbed, and cleaned as best he could, so as to get rid of the appearance it had of having been in some wonderfully damp situation for a long time.

And again the notion came across him that he would like there to open it, and take a look at its contents; but he abstained.

"No—no!" he said. "A hotel in London, and a private room. There I shall feel more secure than I do now; not but what I am secure enough now."

Mr. Ambrose gave his head a sort of jerk in the neighborhood of Corfe Castle, as he spoke:

Yes. He was very secure now.

And so he discussed his good breakfast, and the color came back to his cheeks, and he no more looked the man he did, as he crouched down by the brink of the old well in the castle court at Corfe, than any two of the most dissimilar things in Nature can look like each other.

The post-chaise was ready. The postillion cracked his whip; the smiling landlord bowed from the hotel steps, and Mr. Ambrose smiled in return.

Off he went—off to London.

"What an odd old valise that was the gentleman had with him!" said the landlord of the hotel, as he ascended his door-steps.

"Ha! ha!" laughed Ambrose to himself, as the chaise whirled along. "From one or the other, I shall share the vast estates of the Mortons."

It was half past eight o'clock in the morning that Mr. Ambrose started from the inn door to proceed to London.

It would, with constant relays and only necessary delays for change and refreshment, take eighteen hours to get to London; therefore he would not reach the metropolis until half past two, or thereabout.

"Say three o'clock," said Ambrose to himself; "three o'clock in the morning. Then I shall have till daylight to thoroughly examine the valise, and mature my plans. As for sleep, I can take it by snatches here in the chaise, when we come to smooth, soft bits of road."

The chaise dashed on.

Through many a country town and village; through old ecclesiastical Winchester; through Barrington, and to London.

Mr. Ambrose had many a sound nap; and he was in the middle of one when the chaise stopped to change horses at Kingston.

Mr. Ambrose was cross.

"What the—a—a—deuce!" he said; "could you not go on to the next stage without waking me up?"

"Couldn't, sir," said the post-boy. "Horses knocked up, sir!"

"And what is that to me? Fresh horses directly, do you hear?"

"Yes, sir!"

"What's the time? Dear me, I have let my watch run down!"

"It is a quarter to one, sir," said a portly man, who was the landlord of the inn which supplied the post-horses. "Would not your worship like to sleep here for the night?"

"No—no!"

"Excellent beds, sir."

"No. I say, no!"

"And they do say, sir, that between here and town there are highwaymen!"

"Bah—stuff! Drive on!"

Crack went the postillion's whip, and on went Mr. Ambrose.

Then it was a very strange thing; but

from the meadows close to the banks of the river, a rocket flew up into the air, and burst into a shower of brilliant particles in its descent.

Then another, at an interval of five minutes, and another, five minutes after that.

Mr. Ambrose saw the last one.

"Hilloa! hilloa! Postillion, stop! What was that?"

"A rocket, sir! There was three on 'em, as I seed."

"But what are they for?"

"Don't know, sir! But they do say—"

"Well—what?"

"You hain't afeared-like, sir?"

"Meafraid? Ah! Ha! ha! Afraid of a rocket! My good fellow, I am afraid of nothing!"

"Well, then, sir, they do say—"

"Well—what?"

"As the Owlet sends up them rockets."

"The Owlet?"

"Yes, the highwaymen. They do say as he get 'em sent up to let him know what road to go on to catch them as he wants to catch."

"Eh? But—but—"

"Yes, sir!"

"Well—well—I—a—where is the next stage?"

"A little the other side of East Sheen, sir."

"A good house?"

"Well, sir, not at all first-rate."

"Go on—go on! Oh, it can't be any matter to us. I say, my man."

"Yes, sir!"

"Were you ever stopped by this—a—Owlet that people talk so much about?"

"Never, sir!"

"Of course not—of course not. Drive on now—drive on. Don't spare the cattle. On—on!"

Mr. Ambrose leaned back in the chaise, and made himself comfortable; his head in a corner; his feet on the opposite seat; the valise by his side.

He slept.

The wheels of the chaise went deep into the soft sand of a bit of common land close to Richmond. Mr. Ambrose started wide awake.

The sudden report of a pistol-shot had, in an instant, jarred upon every nerve.

"O Lord! O Lord!" he heard the post-boy cry out.

"Halt! Quiet!" said a loud, clear voice.

"Quiet, and safety! Move, and you die!"

"O good Lord!"

"Peace."

Bang went down the window on the side of the chaise next to which Mr. Ambrose was sitting; and then, by the gleam of the carriage-lamp, he saw a head and a face.

The head had on it a cap with feathers, in the midst of which sparkled a ruby. The face was covered by a mask.

Mr. Ambrose shook with fear till the springs of the post-chaise creaked again.

"You are in good time," said a strange, croaking voice, that almost stopped Mr. Ambrose's blood from flowing, such an agony of fear did it throw him into.

"You are in good time, Mr. Ambrose."

The jeweler's tongue seemed to stick to the roof of his mouth, and it was only by a great effort that he was able to say:

"In—in good time, sir?"

"Yes. I commend your diligence."

"My diligence, sir?"

"Much. Give it to me! Your trouble is over."

"Oh, have mercy upon me! I'm a poor man—a wife, sir, and children. Have mercy!"

"What do you mean? Of what are you afraid?"

"Spare my life!"

"Your life is not threatened yet."

"I thought—that is, you—you—dear sir, you said, I thought, that my troubles were over, which generally means—means—"

"Death!"

"Oh, spare me!"

"I did not threaten. You added a final letter to the word. It was your trouble—not your troubles, I said was over."

"I—I—yes, sir! God bless you—thank you."

"And now I will relieve you of the valise."

Mr. Ambrose uttered a yell of agony. The valise—the valise that he had gone so far for—that he had committed murder for—that he had nursed up by his side through so long

a journey—that he had abstained from opening at Corfe Castle—that he had left intact when he was tempted to examine it at the inn—the valise that was the object of all his hopes and all his expectations, was coolly asked of him, as if it were a bauble, and as if he had been just to fetch it for this man, or fiend, who was at the carriage-door, and who spoke like a parrot. No wonder that the eyes of Mr. Ambrose dilated, until they looked awfully prominent; no wonder that he uttered that yell which nearly set the post-horses off into a gallop.

"What is the matter?" said the horseman.

"Matter! the—the matter! Murder! fire! help!"

"Are you ill?"

"Mad—mad!"

"I thought so. But it matters not. The valise, if you please; and I thank you for your pains and your diligence."

"You? you?"

"Yes."

"But it is you who are mad. Ha! ha! A highwayman, and he sees that a valise is all my luggage. Ha! ha! Nothing in it—nothing but crusty, musty law-papers—of no use in all the world to anybody but their owner, and not much to him. Ha! ha! My purse, of course; my watch, of course. Ha!"

"Mr. Ambrose," said the horseman, "it seems to me, sir, that you must have taken leave of your senses. I send you to Corfe Castle for a valise, you kindly go to much trouble and expense to get it, and then you fancy that I would rob you. Oh no!"

"You—sent—me?"

"Yes."

"You? Then who—who—. Oh it is too absurd; and yet, how come you to know? You sent—"

"Yes, I sent you."

"Then, in the name of all that is diabolical, who are you?"

"Just so."

"Just what?" yelled Mr. Ambrose.

The horseman lifted the hat and plume from his head, and then the mask from his face.

There was the owl's head and face, beak, eyes, and ears—all perfect.

"The Owllet!" gasped Ambrose.

"Just so."

"Lost—lost!"

"No; found. It was lost at the bottom of the dry well at Corfe Castle, but it is now found. The valise—the valise, I say, that I sent you for!"

There was a rush of blood to the head of Mr. Ambrose; a cold feeling was about his heart. With a cry, he slid off the seat of the chaise, and fell in a swoon on to the mat at the bottom of it.

The Owllet reached in his hand at the open window, and took out the little valise.

"Postillion," he said.

"O Lord! yes, sir."

"This gentleman is Mr. Ambrose, jeweler and goldsmith, of Ludgate Hill, in the City of London. You will drive him home, and he will pay you. But, since you halted at once when I cried halt, take these."

The Owllet held out his hand.

"Your cap!" he said, "your cap!"

The postillion took off his round-crowned cap, and held it, and the Owllet flung into it a handful of guineas.

"Remember me!" he said. "Come, Leo!"

Another moment and he was gone. After him, too, the postillion saw go a very large dog, which kept up pace with the coal-black horse.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE MARRIAGE CERTIFICATE—MR. AMBROSE'S PLAN.

The morning was fair and bright, after that night of horror to Mr. Ambrose, the jeweler. Fair and bright to all who, with honest mind and purpose, were about righteous work, but most unwelcome in its heavenly beauty to those who, amid the storm of evil passions, would rather Nature had put on its gloomiest aspect than the sun of that almost supplementary summer should impart its golden beauty to old England.

It does happen, sometimes, in our climate of caprices, that, for a short period in the autumn of the year, the sun will shine forth in its yellowest splendor; soft airs from the South will puff gently over the land; and

vegetation, forgetful that the stern realities of winter must yet interpose, will start into a new life; the bud and the blossom will appear in the orchard; the geranium will flaunt its beauty in the well-kept garden; and through all the air there will be the soft feel of summer-time.

Such, then, was the aspect of the morning after the encounter of the Owllet with the jeweler, when a carriage drove up to the door of the house in St. James' square, which had been, in so singular a fashion, made over to the occupation of Gerald Alton and Alice.

From this carriage there alighted, with all the easy nonchalance of a young man of fashion, the Owllet, in his undress uniform as an officer of the Guards.

There was a smile upon his face as he gave some brief directions to the driver of the carriage, and then he took something from the interior of the vehicle, which looked like an old, black, mouldy parcel.

That was the valise.

An immense dog walked into the hall of the house after the Owllet.

"This is a friend of mine," he said, to the hall porter, as he patted the dog on the head. "He will, I am sure, be made very welcome by Mr. Alton, your master; and he will sit down here in the hall by you, and wait for me."

"Dear me, sir, what a fine dog!" said the hall-porter.

"He is, indeed."

"Perhaps, sir, he—he won't be contented here with me."

"Oh yes. His name is Drift."

"Drift, sir?"

"Yes. You will stay here, Drift, for me—here. You understand, Drift?"

The dog looked at the Owllet for a moment, and then quietly and composedly sat down by the side of the hall-porter; who, however, did not seem to be quite well assured of the continued pacific intentions of an animal as large and almost as powerful as a lion.

Then the Owllet, with the valise in his hand, walked slowly up the principal staircase of the house, and made his way to that room in which there was the gilt furniture and the silk hangings.

The room was empty, but the Owllet went to a particular portion of the wall, and pressed his fingers upon what looked like the head of a nail.

Probably some spring was touched, which struck a bell; for in a few seconds one of the tall, secret doors in the paneling of the room was cautiously opened, and the abbé peeped into the apartment.

"Come in," said the Owllet.

The abbé made a very low bow, and came into the room.

He spoke in his softest and lowest tones, as he said:

"May I hope that your majesty is quite well, and that all has turned out according to your majesty's wishes?"

"Yes, abbé; but you had better not call me 'majesty' yet. I am what I seem always. You see my uniform, and with it I am Ensign Harold Blanchard, of the Coldstream Guards."

The abbé bowed low again.

"Is Annie well?"

"Her royal highness is quite well."

"Good. You will now, abbé, summon to me Mr. Alton and Mrs. Alton, as she is called, but in reality the Countess of Morton. I have, I hope and expect, in this valise—which has cost far less trouble to procure than I could ever have imagined—the proofs of her claim to the title and estates of the Mortons."

"Your majesty could create a Countess of Morton without proofs."

"Yes; but it will be more satisfactory, by far, to the countess, to have her claim put in such a form that she will feel she owes it to her regular descent, rather than to the favors of a king."

The abbé bowed again.

"In regard," added the Owllet, "to Mr. Gerald Alton, we can easily confer upon him a patent of nobility when the proper time comes."

The abbé made no remark; but, with another low bow, he left the room.

In five minutes more, both Alice and Gerald were with the Owllet.

The Owllet smiled as he shook hands with them, and pointed to the valise.

"I hope, Alice," he said, "that you will

there find cause to blame us if we presume to name you other than Countess of Morton."

"And is it possible!" exclaimed Alice, "that that can be the valise from the well at Corfe Castle?"

"I firmly believe it is."

"And you, dear friend," said Gerald, "have you been to encounter the trouble and the risk of procuring this valise because you knew that it was important to our fortunes?"

"Not exactly. Trouble I have had but little; risk, none at all. At another time I will amuse you with an account of how I became possessed of this valise. Let it suffice, for the present, that I have it, and that I did not go down a well in Corfe Castle for it. I generally get our enemies to do any such work as that."

"Our enemies, sir?"

"Yes; but we waste what may possibly be precious time; and, indeed, I have much to think of and much to do."

A slight shade of sadness passed across the face of the Owllet as he spoke; but he appeared then, by a sudden effort, to shake it away. He looked at Gerald and Alice with his old, familiar smile; in which, by the way, there was even a slight touch of melancholy.

"Who," he said, "shall open this valise?"

"Shall I, dear Alice?" said Gerald.

"Yes, Gerald."

The valise was locked and strapped securely; and Gerald turned it twice over, without being well able to make up his mind how to open it.

The Owllet smiled again.

"Come, now," he said, "let me advise the shortest way of opening such a case as this."

He turned the valise completely over, and with his sword he cut the bottom of it open along its entire length.

"There," he said. "It is but the casket in which we expect to find a jewel."

Gerald eagerly pulled out the contents of the valise.

Old, musty papers; letters; the title-deeds of a small estate, which had been given from the patrimonial property to the Honorable Captain Morton by his brother, the earl; some medals and stars for foreign service in the wars of the Low Countries, and a small tin case, tied round with crimson ribbon.

"I fancy," said the Owllet, "that in this case will be what we want."

Alice's eyes were filled with tears as she saw these words of her dead father brought to light, and she could scarcely speak.

Gerald's hands shook so much that he could not open the tin case.

"Permit me," said the Owllet, and he at once opened the case.

There was a small, gold locket, containing a miniature.

"Her mother!" said the Owllet. "How like!"

"My mother!" cried Alice; and her eyes ran over with tears as she looked at the miniature.

"Yes, yes."

"And you, dear friend, you knew her?"

"I did; that is, I have seen her."

"And you think this miniature is like?"

"It is, indeed."

"But you did not tell me that you knew my mother, dear sir."

"No. But I do not think that I need any longer keep secret from you, Alice, that your mother and mine were sisters."

Alice uttered an exclamation.

Gerald looked deeply interested.

"Yes," added the Owllet, "what I am telling you is a matter in which you may rely; although it is not, I warn you, all that I hope to be able to tell you soon. There were two sisters; and one married your father, the Honorable Captain Morton, the brother of the Earl of Morton; the other married my father."

"And who was he?" asked Alice, in the most innocent manner in the world.

A faint, sad smile came over the face of the Owllet as he replied:

"Dear cousin Alice, I cannot just yet tell you that. You will understand that both the marriages were secret ones—your father's and my father's. I am still seeking for legal proof of my legitimacy. You have been seeking for proof of yours, and, if I mistake not, here it is."

A small folded paper was in the tin case.

along with the miniature. The Owlet unfolded it as he spoke, and cast his eyes hastily over it.

"Yes," he added; "a properly-attested certificate of your father's marriage with your mother, at the Hague, by the chaplain to the stadtholder. Dear cousin and countess, I give you joy!"

"And my mother was Alice Salisbury?"

"The Lady Alicia Salisbury was her name. I fancy, too, that your real name should be Alicia. But you are the Countess of Morton in your own right."

A slight flush of color came to the face of Gerald as he said: "My Alice, you might have made a nobler alliance than the poor apprentice of a jeweler."

"No, Gerald, no. Do not say so. My noblest choice is the noblest heart; and Nature has granted you, dear Gerald, a patent of nobility in soul, and thought, and purpose that kins might envy."

"That is well," said the Owlet; "and yet titles go for something in the world; and we must see what we can do for Gerald in that way on the first opportunity. At present, dear Alice, I would have you rest contented that you are in possession of the important document. There will come a time soon, I hope, when it may be produced; and then justice will be done to you."

"We will wait your pleasure, sir, in all things," said Gerald.

"It is well. You will lose nothing by so waiting. Your uncle, Alice, the present Earl of Morton, is insane, and the inmate of an asylum. Sir Bernfide Esperance has seized upon the family estates; and hence he was desirous of your death."

"The villain!" exclaimed Gerald.

"True. There does not, I believe, exist a greater villain in all the world than that man; but, if I mistake not, he now lies at the point of death, at Mr. Ambrose's, the jeweler's; and there let him lie for a few days. I am occupied with an affair that, until I now see the end of, will engross me fully."

The Owlet's mind seemed, each moment, to be getting more and more pre-occupied; and he now paced the large apartment, with disordered strides.

The task that he had set himself in the council chamber—to free the throne of its then occupant—was beginning to press heavily upon him.

"You are disturbed, dear friend," said Gerald. "Is there anything in the world that I can do to aid you?"

"Nothing—nothing."

"If, however, it should be possible for me to be of any kind of assistance, you can scarcely guess what pleasure it would be, both to me and to our dear Alice, to make some attempt to prove our gratitude."

"I am sure of that—I am sure of that!"

At this moment there came a low, cautious tap at the door of the apartment—that is to say, the ordinary door of it, and not at any of its secret entrances.

The Owlet stepped back a pace, and plunged his hand into the breast of his apparel, as if he had there some concealed weapon of defence.

And so in truth he had, for he knew not at what moment some *mal à propos* circumstance might occur, to place him in imminent danger.

It was the abbé, though, only, who appeared.

"Oh! it is you?"

"Yes, your—"

"Ah!"

The abbé bowed low, and then added:

"Yes, Mr. Blanchard. Yes it is I."

"That is well."

"I have come to say that there is a man in the hall who, strangely enough, asked to see Mr. Alton, and who has been trying to question the hall-porter concerning the inhabitants of the house."

"Indeed?"

"No one can know I am here," said Gerald.

"Nor I," said Alice; "for I have not been without the house."

The Owlet considered for a moment or two and then said:

"Let this valise, and all that it contains be removed into the next apartment."

"Yes, yes," said Gerald, "I will take charge of them."

"Do so. And you, abbé, ascertain who and what the man is. And then I think Mr.

Alton should see him, for our object is not—to bring suspicion on the house."

Gerald and Alice glanced at each other, and then Gerald said, in a tone of entreaty:

"Oh, kind and good friend, to whom we owe so much, if you would only trust us."

"I dare not yet."

Gerald bowed and was silent.

The abbé came back.

"The man says his name is Ambrose."

"Ambrose!" exclaimed Gerald.

"Ambrose," faltered Alice.

"The jeweler," said the Owlet.

The abbé looked from one to the other of them, and stoutly rubbed his old shriveled hands together.

"What can he want here?" said Alice.

"Some villainy, of course," said the Owlet. "Let me think. Yes. That will do."

The Owlet remained in thought a few moments more, and then he said, freely and rapidly:

"Gerald, you will see this man in this room?"

"Yes, sir."

"You will then find out what he comes for. It is most likely some villainy about the valise; but do not on any account own that you have it, or that you have seen it."

"I will not."

"You will comprehend that, for the sake of confounding the villain—of catching him, so to speak, in his own snare, I shall be a listener to all that passes; and when you hear a slight tinkling sound, which will be in reality a clock playing an air, you will, on any excuse you like, leave Ambrose alone in this room."

"I will."

"Then all the rest I will arrange; and you will be free of him once and for all. Alice, will you return to your own room. Pardon me for assuming such mastery in the house, dear cousin."

"We rather feel more gratitude," said Alice, "for all your goodness."

A few minutes, then, and the valise and its contents were removed. Then the Owlet watched until Gerald was out of the apartment for a moment, conducting Alice to her room, and he touched a spring that opened one of the secret panels, and passed through.

The abbé bowed profoundly; and when Gerald returned, he was rather surprised to find the abbé in such an attitude of obeisance to the wall merely, as it appeared to him.

"Abbé?"

"Eh? Oh!"

"I will now see this man."

The abbé slid out of the room; and, in a few moments, pale, haggard, and half dead with the fatigue, the fright, and the mental commotion he had gone through, Mr. Ambrose appeared.

Ambrose had evidently quite made up his mind what course of action to pursue; and he put on a sickly smile as he held out his hand, which Gerald paid no attention to, and said:

"No doubt, my dear Gerald, you are quite surprised to see me, your old master, here—Hem! Well, some explanation is due to me from you, and from me to you. You see I watched Timber, or rather I got somebody to watch him, to this house. Well, when I got somebody to find out that you it was who resided here, and that you were actually married to Alice Home, my dear boy, I congratulate you—I do indeed—hem! Well, do you know I have found out that that Sir Bernfide Esperance is a terrible rogue."

"Indeed, sir."

"Yes, my dear boy—hem—yes. And what is more, I have found out that Alice is his—his cousin, I suppose, and the real heir-ess to the estates of the Morton family. Now I—I, my dear boy, only, can help her unto the possession of them! Sir Bernfide offers me half the estates if I help him! Here is the deed to that effect; but I would rather help you and Alice. Come, will you do the same?"

A slight tinkling noise came upon the still air of the room, and Mr. Ambrose started. It was a French waltz being played by a clock.

"Eh! What is that?"

"Only a clock, Mr. Ambrose! If you will wait for me here, you will soon have an answer."

"To be sure—to be sure! Consult Alice—consult Alice! To be sure! But of one

thing be assured, that I, and I only, can help you to the titles and estates of Morton, if you make terms with me."

Gerald bowed slightly and left the room.

CHAPTER XXV.

SIR BERNFIDE ESPERANCE AND MR. AMBROSE ARE TOO CLEVER FOR EACH OTHER.

When Mr. Ambrose found himself alone in that old palatial-looking apartment, he licked his parched lips—parched with the fever of anxiety and fear, and looked curiously about him.

"A fine house, indeed," he said. "Hem! A very fine house. Gerald is well lodged. I can't quite comprehend it, unless some one has taken him by the hand on account of Alice, who knows that she may become possessed of the estates of Morton. I am quite clear though, now, about my policy. Since the valise is gone, it is into the hands of friends of Gerald and Alice that it has so gone, or of people who will make terms with them about it; and, so as I am first in the field, if I can make a good bargain all will be well."

Mr. Ambrose was not quite sure that, after all, he was doing the cleverest thing, and yet it had occurred to him to do what he was now doing as a grand stroke of policy.

He had been home.

But he had not set any one to watch Timber, although he had been watched by a man in his employment, who had done so on his own account.

When, therefore, Mr. Ambrose reached his own house, which he did at a very early hour in the morning, with his heart full of disappointment and bitterness, he had abstained from seeing Sir Bernfide Esperance, but he sat down to try and arrange his thoughts as to what he had better do.

Then was it that this workman and shopman of Mr. Ambrose came to him quite full of his news, that he had observed something so peculiar about the incomings and outgoings of Timber, that he had followed him, and found him go into a grand house in St. James' Square, and that, by dint of careful inquiry, he had ascertained that a Mr. Alton lived there, who was just married.

"And indeed, sir," added the spy, "I stood by the railings opposite the house, and I saw our apprentice, Gerald Alton, and the teacher, who was going to be hanged for stealing the diamond bracelet, both look out from the balcony, as grand as any duke and duchess."

That Alice had found friends and protectors was, of course, evident from this; and therefore, in the politic views of Mr. Ambrose, she was the person to side with now, before it should be too late.

Hence his visit to St. James' square.

But the difficulty that Gerald had had to keep his hands off him he little knew, because he was not at all aware that Timber had been in a position to enlighten Gerald, concerning his villainous compact with Sir Bernfide Esperance. Indeed, it was only on account of the strict promise he had made the Owlet, that Gerald abstained from taking summary vengeance, there and then, upon the jeweler.

And so Mr. Ambrose was alone, and looking about him with curious observation at everything in the apartment.

He little thought what eyes were upon him.

"Yes," he muttered, "I shall be right at last, and have nothing to fear. That Jonas Brand is dead, and there is no one else who knows anything about the whole affair but Sir Bernfide, and he lies in rather a precarious state at my house."

A strange smile flitted for a second over the face of the jeweler.

"Yes; in a very precarious state at my house. So very precarious, that if he were to drink anything that would not agree with him—ha, ha!—there would be an end of him. And he is extremely likely to do so!"

Mr. Ambrose looked pleased.

"Then I can, by siding with Alice, be certain of reward, and the death of Jonas Brand and the death of Sir Bernfide puts out of the world all evidence that I plotted or planned, or had anything to do with the other side. And as regards the bracelet, it was Sir Bernfide who rolled it up in Alice's music, not I. It was he who did it. I was compelled to prosecute. Besides, did I not recommend her

to mercy? Of course I did. But that highwayman troubles me."

Mr. Ambrose shuddered, as he thought of the Owlet.

"But still—still, he added, he will produce the valise in their interests, and I will tell Gerald and Alice, that having extorted from Sir Bernfide the secret of where the valise was, that I went to get it for them. I will make a good story of a dreadful fight that I will say I had with Jonas Brand, of how I was robbed by a highwayman, and so on. Oh, yes. The other side dead, I shall be on the right side, and do well; only I wish to know who it was that had taken up the affair for Alice and Gerald, and placed them in this fine house."

"It is I!" said a voice.

Mr. Ambrose fell to the floor, with a scream, and then on his hands and knees, he glared up in the face of the Owlet.

Yes. There was the Owlet standing a few paces from him, in his full costume of a highwayman, with that fearful owl's face, and the few words he had uttered had the memorable parrot-like croak about them, that he (Mr. Ambrose) knew so well, as having heard them on the common, near Richmond.

"It is I!" repeated the Owlet.

"Good God!"

"Ay, you are right."

"Right?"

"Yes."

"I, well, my dear Ow, sir. O my poor brain. I suppose I am mad."

"What do you want here?"

"What? do, I, oh! it was, my dear, good Ow—sir, it was to do good—good."

"What good?"

"Help Mr. Alton, and Miss Alice Home—Miss Alice Home, in particular, to her rights."

"What rights?"

"Her title—her estates. I do believe, on my life—on my conscience, dear sir, that in the valise which I was bringing to town for them, when you stopped me, are important papers."

"Well?"

"Which may—which will prove that she—that is, Miss Alice Home, that was, is the Countess of Morton in her own right."

"Ah!"

"And so I was very anxious—that is to say, very desirous, indeed, of aiding, assisting, abetting you see, in what was right, and in restoring the young lady to her inheritance."

"When?"

"Eh? When? Oh! as soon as possible."

"I mean, when did you become anxious to restore her to her inheritance?"

"Oh! always—as soon as I knew who and what she was, my dear Mr. a—Ow—sir."

"A lie."

"Sir?"

"A lie. You knew perfectly well who and what she was, when, in conjunction with Sir Bernfide Esperance, you tried to get her hanged on a false charge of robbing you of a diamond bracelet."

"O Lord! O Lord!"

"Which you had yourself stolen, inasmuch as it belonged to the late Lady Adela Salisbury."

The hair very nearly stood up on end on Mr. Ambrose's head. His eyes glared upon the Owlet, and he opened and shut his hands convulsively.

"You—you seem—to know—"

"All!"

Mr. Ambrose groaned aloud. He beat his breast with his hands, as, upon his knees, before the dreaded Owlet, he still moaned.

"Yes," added the Owlet, "I do know all. Your plotting, your planning, and your scheming are all in vain. I know that you are a villain, who, for the love of gold, would have sacrificed without a pang the young, the noble, and the innocent."

"Mercy!"

"Had you mercy when you permitted that diamond bracelet to be rolled up in the music of that innocent girl, who, to procure an honest subsistence, came to your house?"

"Oh! Oh!"

"Had you mercy when she was condemned to die a terrible death at the hands of the public executioner?"

Mr. Ambrose beat his breast again.

"And when she was preserved from that fearful fate, did mercy find a place in your heart, when you still combined with Sir Bernfide Esperance to murder the poor mad Earl of Morton?"

"No—no, I did not!"

"I say you did. Do not lie to me or it will be worse for you. I say you did—you were to do these things when that wretched man, who is now hovering between life and death at your house, was brought to you in the sedan chair, dabbled in his blood."

"These things—"

"Yes, you were to send to Antwerp for the learned man who was to cure him."

"Oh! you know that, too?"

"You were to go to Corfe Castle and get the valise from the well."

"Yes—yes!"

"And you were to communicate with the brutal keeper of the asylum—so called—in which the mad Earl of Morton is confined, that the time had come when he was wanted to live no more."

Mr. Ambrose felt faint and sick.

"You see I do know all."

"But still you will have some mercy upon me. I am not alone in the world—I have two children! Oh sir, for their sakes spare me!"

"Alas! poor children with such a father!"

"But—but, without me they would be poor indeed. I work for them. For them you see, sir, I strive; and if you take my life, all will be confusion for them! Oh! pray spare me, if you have one touch of pity, for my children's sake! I see, I hear, that nothing is unknown to you. My heart trembles to ask itself who and what you are: but you are something more than human. Let me implore you, then, to spare me. Let me live—oh! let me live!"

"Wretch!"

"I am—I am indeed. I feel that I am, and yet you will be merciful."

"On one condition."

"Any condition—any in the world; only say what are your commands, and I will obey them as never yet slave obeyed his master."

"The condition is, that from this moment, until you are called upon by me to do so, you will let all these transactions be locked up in your own breast, and that you will not, to man, to woman, or to child, breathe one word concerning them."

"Too easy—oh! all too easy! Set me some task. Say that I am to do something that will be powerful, difficult, and will require some effort."

"No—I have spoken. Now you may go, but beware! I say beware!"

Mr. Ambrose shuddered.

"In bed—at board—in the thronged streets—amid the silence and solitude of your own chamber—in the air above the earth, or in its lowest depths below, if you disobey me, I will find you, and woe be to you!"

"Oh! say no more. I will obey—indeed I will. I am your slave; I live now but to obey you. I feel stronger even with the thought that I am under your orders."

"Rise."

"Yes, yes!"

Mr. Ambrose scrambled to his feet.

"Go home now, and be silent as the grave."

"I will—I will. And—and, sir—O good sir?"

"Well?"

"What shall I say to Sir Bernfide Esperance? He will question me. He will ask me how and why it is that I have not brought the valise from Corfe Castle."

"Wait!"

"Yes, yes."

The Owlet slowly went toward the wall.

"Look from yonder window."

"Yes."

"If you so much as turn your head to glance around this room, until I tell you, you are a dead man."

"I will not—I will not!"

The Owlet touched the spring in the wall and was gone. The abbé was on the other side.

"Go quickly," said the Owlet. "Let the valise be tied up as best it may—but empty—and then bring it to me. Gerald Alton will give it to you."

The abbé bowed and went for the valise. The Owlet watched Ambrose, and saw that he did not make the slightest attempt to look round.

"He is thoroughly terrified," said the Owlet to himself. "The law shall deal with him in good time. It is not for me to execute its vengeance."

The abbé brought the valise.

"That is well."

The Owlet then touched the spring of the paneled door, and was in the room again.

"Behold!" he said.

Ambrose looked round.

"Here is the valise. The sight of it will satisfy Sir Bernfide Esperance. It is emptied of its contents, but he will not know that. Let him have it."

"Yes—yes!"

"Now go."

"And—and—"

"What more?"

"I was only saying that you would protect me; that you look upon me now as—a—a—friend."

"Wretch, begone!"

Mr. Ambrose darted out of the room and down the staircase. He crossed the hall and was out of the house in another moment; and with the valise in his hand, he ran all the way from St. James' square to Ludgate Hill, where he arrived so faint, and so weary, that he fell prostrate on the floor of his own shop. The assiduous shopman picked him up.

"Dear!—dear!" he said. "What can be the matter? My dear sir, you are hurt—only say that you are hurt! Why, the learned Doctor Bergheim has only just left the house—he came all the way from Antwerp, do you know, sir, to attend on the worshipful Sir Bernfide Esperance?"

Mr. Ambrose sat up on the floor.

"Doctor Bergheim?" he said.

"Yes, sir. He and Sir Bernfide seem to be quite old friends, dear sir."

"How do you know?"

"Oh!—I—I thought that perhaps you would like to know, so you see, dear sir, I just went up the stairs a little way and—"

"Listened?"

"Well—I—a—yes!"

"You were quite right; I did want to know if they were old friends. But now, help me up. That will do. Now I have something to say to you!"

"To me, sir?"

"Yes. If ever in bed; or on a board, or in the bowels of the earth, or up in the air, you say one word, or even think a word, of what you know—beware! beware! beware! Woe! woe! woe!"

Mr. Ambrose thought that he was imitating the Owlet to perfection.

The assiduous shopman turned pale.

"Lord, sir! I won't say a word!"

"Don't! Beware! beware!"

Mr. Ambrose clutched the valise in his hands and went up stairs to Sir Bernfide Esperance.

"Timber!" called out the assiduous shopman. "Timber, I say! Timber!"

"Here you are," said Timber.

"Timber!"

"Well?"

"If ever you, by looks or winks, or nods, or words or kicks, or in any sort of way say what you know—beware! woe! Beware of woe! Vengeance! Ah! woe! Beware!"

"Lor'!" said Timber.

"No more! no more! Hush! whisht! Boo! Ha! ha! Beware!"

The assiduous shopman retired into the counting-house.

"He's gone a little mad," said Timber, with a philosophical look, "but I'll go up stairs and hear what I can about Sir Bernfide and Mr. Ambrose, for they will be sure to have a talk together now."

Sir Bernfide Esperance's room was shaded by the blinds being carefully drawn down—only a faint sort of twilight made its way in. Sir Bernfide was better, but he felt fearfully languid, and it was quite an effort to him to raise hand or foot.

It was the loss of blood that produced this effect. A fearful quantity of the vital fluid had made its way from his veins while he was being conveyed from the common to Ludgate Hill after his wound.

And yet, despite all this languor—despite all this weakness, which reduced him almost to the helpless condition of an infant, the bad, bold, scheming intellect was active, and a malignant smile was on his lips.

He was muttering to himself—very faintly muttering the full designs of his soul.

"It's strange," he said. "It's very strange that I hear no more of Jonas Brand. I should have thought, now, that he would be sure to come. Well, well, it don't matter—not a bit, not a bit. Bergheim will soon set me up again,

and then if Ambrose does but bring the valise, in which I feel quite sure will be found the marriage certificate of Alicia Salisbury, all will go capitally. Oh, if I could only see that valise, I think it would give me new blood, and then—ha! And then! O God!"

He had moved slightly, and the wound felt a pang that was terrible.

"And then if I can only get Ambrose to take ever so little of this nice and pleasant-looking potion that Bergheim, my old friend, has let me have for him, why, he is a dead man, and the deed he has that shares the estates with him, he may take to the grave, for all I care. Fool! idiot! Did he think that I would share with him that which I have striven for during my life? No, no, no! What is that?"

Sir Bernside heard the fall of Ambrose into the shop below; but as no other sound succeeded it, he thought it some accidental noise merely.

"Yes," he added, "I think the plan is good. It is quite impossible for Alice to substantiate her claim without the certificate which is in the valise, for all the persons who were present at the marriage, or knew anything of it, are dead; and I myself have tampered with the Registry at the Hague in such a manner that no vestige of such a marriage is there to be found in the way of a record. But it was there fair enough."

What was that again? Another noise came upon his ear. It was a door shutting sharply. He listened for a time, but all was still. He did not know that Mr. Ambrose was slowly creeping up the stairs with the valise.

"Ah," he added, "I must just see the valise, and then I will get him to take a little of the syrup, and all will be over with him. Bergheim warrants it a certain poison in ten minutes, and so it is well worth the thousand pounds I have promised him for it."

"What is he muttering about?" whispered Ambrose to himself, as he paused at the door of the chamber with the valise in his hand.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE DIET DRINK AND THE SYRUP.

Sir Bernside Esperance spoke in much too low a tone for Mr. Ambrose to hear him.

"I can't make out what he says," he whispered. "Well, it don't matter. He won't say much long. I must and will get rid of him."

Mr. Ambrose then went up another flight of steps to his own room; he carried the valise with him; he unlocked a cupboard in that room of his above; it was exactly above Sir Bernside's chamber, and he took from it a small vial. There was about a table-spoonful of a white liquor in the vial.

"That will do," said Mr. Ambrose. "He was taking a diet-drink when I left. It will not be difficult to decant this into it, and then—

—good night to Sir Bernside Esperance. I must and will be rid of him."

"Some one overhead," said Sir Bernside, as he heard the foot-fall, light though it was, of Mr. Ambrose in the room above. "That old wretch who is employed to nurse me, I suppose, and who has been drunk ever since—robbing the house; I should not wonder. Well, it don't matter to me. Not a bit, not a bit. I wonder if I shall get him to take the syrup?"

Mr. Ambrose had just commenced his descent from above.

"I wonder," he said, "if I shall get him to take the diet-drink?"

But a little circumstance had taken place before Mr. Ambrose's time to come down stairs to Sir Bernside's chamber:

Timber had made his way to its door, and after listening for a few moments, he had got down on his hands and knees and crawled into the room, and right under the bed. The absurd-looking leather smalls just disappeared as Mr. Ambrose reached the door.

Timber, from experience, knew what a capital post of observation he was in, and, in fact, the hangings were so voluminous, and the bedstead so large and old, and dark, and the room so shaded, that had any one tried to look for an eaves-dropper, Timber might not have been seen.

"Hem!" said Mr. Ambrose, as he reached the threshold of the door, and then he added: "What a fool I am. He might have been asleep."

"Eh? cried, Sir Bernside—who is there?"

"Ah! he is awake! My dear Sir Bernside, it is I."

"Ah, Ambrose!"

"Exactly—and I rejoice to hear you speak so well."

"Oh! my dear friend! I don't speak well. I am weak. I am very weak, but it is the sound of your voice that has revived me a little. That is all. Pray come more forward to the light, that I may see you."

Ambrose did so, and held up the valise before the eyes of Sir Bernside, who thereupon uttered a cry of joy.

"You see—you see!"

"I do! I do! You have got it. O Ambrose! you are a capital fellow."

"To be sure I am."

"You are, indeed. You bring me new life by the sight of that treasure. It is from Corfe?"

"It is from Corfe."

"My dear Ambrose!"

"My dear Sir Bernside!"

"Give me your hand?"

"With pleasure."

"Oh! oh! You shook me!"

"I forgot. Your wound won't bear shaking hands."

"No matter. I am delighted. Did you get it easy?"

"No."

"No?"

"Why, I can't say I did, my dear Sir Bernside."

"Let me touch it—let me feel it. Ah! cold and damp, mouldy. You—you have not—eh? opened it?"

"Not I."

"On your word?"

"On my word. It is yours, and yours only. Take it. I will place it at the head of your bed, and then you will know that you have it in perfect safety. Let me. Oh, I am sure you will feel pleased, and get well all the sooner by having it there."

"I shall."

"There—there."

Mr. Ambrose, as he leant over the side of the bed to place the valise, likewise bent over the small, round table, on which was the diet-drink, and other matters and medicaments, in jugs and bottles.

He dexterously decanted the white liquor from the little vial he had brought from his bed-room into the diet-drink, and then concealed the bottle until he could gently thrust it into his pocket.

And Sir Bernside Esperance, commonly so sharp, so suspicious, and so clever, was so mentally dazzled by the sight of the valise, that he did not see him do it.

The valise was securely wedged in between the head of the bedstead and the pillows.

"There," said Ambrose.

"I feel better already," said Sir Bernside.

"Of course you do."

"I am delighted!"

"To be sure."

"And now, my dear friend, tell me all about it."

"I will. But has Doctor Bergheim been here?"

"He has."

"And what does he say?"

"Oh! that I shall be quite well."

"How pleasant. Then all will go well."

"All—all. You will now see that the Earl of Morton is put out of the way."

"I have."

"You have?"

"I may as well tell him I have," thought Ambrose. "The more contented he feels, the more likely he is to take some diet-drink soon."

"Yes; I have done all you wished me."

"Admirable—admirable!"

"I will praise him to the echo," thought Sir Bernside, "and then get him to taste the syrup."

"And my dear Ambrose."

"Yes."

"Did you go down the well?"

"Oh no."

"No?"

"Certainly not. The strangest thing in the world took place. When I got to Corfe Castle, in the middle of the night, after a most toilsome journey, who should I see there but Jonas Brand?"

"Jonas—Brand?"

"Yes. He had got there about half an

hour before me, and was making energetic movements to go down the well."

"And yet—"

Sir Bernside turned his eyes upward to the valise."

"And yet, you would say, I have the valise. True—you see it."

"My dear Ambrose, I am all amazement."

"Oh you don't know me yet. When I have a thing to do, I do it. Well, when I saw Jonas Brand there, I said to myself: 'Well and good, my fine fellow. Since you are here, you may as well go down the well and get the valise, for it is not a very agreeable thing to do.'"

"You said that?"

"To myself."

"Ah!"

"And I thought that, when he brought it up, it would be my time to take it from him."

"From Jonas Brand?"

"From Jonas Brand."

"Ambrose, you are a hero!"

"Hem!"

"You astonish me!"

"Well, I thought you would be a little surprised; but I will tell you."

"Do—do."

"Well, the place was awkwardly situated. The well had been covered with planks, and then turfed over, so that it looked like no well at all; but Brand had found it, and got the turf and the wood away, and there it was; and he had a rope, and staples to hold it, and a lantern and all complete; and down he went."

"You watched him?"

"I watched him."

"Go on—go on."

"Down he went. In about a quarter of an hour, I heard him coming up, up, up, slowly."

"Up—up!"

"Yes; up slowly, till he got to the brink, and then out he sprang; upon which I stepped up to him and said: 'My dear sir, that valise, that you have just brought out of that well, is the very thing I want.'"

"You said that?"

"I did."

"To Jonas Brand?"

"Yes."

"Bah! boo!"

Sir Bernside Esperance kicked in his bed, to the great agony of his wound, which then made him give a howl of pain.

"Do you doubt me?"

"Oh no, no; go on, you infernal li—I mean, you perfect hero."

"Well, thereupon we fought—a terrible conflict—for more than an hour, until at last, by a lucky push, I sent him down the well, and kept the valise."

"Oh—oh!"

"Then I flung on top of him a jagged piece of the old ruins of the castle; and covering the well with the boards and turf again, I patted all down smooth, and came away, and here I am."

Sir Bernside Esperance raised himself painfully a little way on his arm, and looked at Ambrose, and then at the valise.

"Well?" said the jeweler.

"Ambrose."

"What now? Have I not done well?"

"Is there one word of truth in all this?"

"Truth, Sir Bernside?"

"Yes. Is there one word?"

"Why, it is all true; and when you see the valise, I do think that your doubts hardly become you."

"What is this, on the side of it, a plate? Ah! I see: the arms of the Mortons. It is right. Ambrose, I don't know what to think or what to say to you; but, if in addition to bringing me this valise, you have really and truly left Jonas Brand in the well at Corfe Castle, you are the cleverest fellow I ever knew."

"Oh! he is there."

"It is true, I was only wondering what had become of him."

"Wonder, then, no longer. He is not lost."

"Not lost?"

"No, because you know where he is!"

"You are facetious as well as brave, Ambrose. I don't know another man in all England who could have done all this so well."

"You flatter me."

"Not at all—not at all. And not the least favor and kindness you have done me, has consisted in the prompt manner in which you

have sent for Doctor Bergheim, who brought with him an invaluable syrup, a few drops of which in water—I have it here—acts as such a restorative, that let a man be ever so hurt, ever so weak, ever so weary, ever so sad, ever so perplexed, it revives, comforts, and upholds him."

"Indeed?"

"It has saved me from death; for he swears to me that I have not a quart of blood left in my veins."

"You don't say so?"

"Yes. Here it is."

"The syrup?"

"Yes. I keep it close to my hand, so that it should be safe. Ah, invaluable medication! well I know that Bergheim alone possessed the secret of your preparation, or I would not have sent to Antwerp for him!"

"Is it agreeable?"

"Delightful, because you know what good it does."

"It looks clear and bright."

"Mind—mind, don't spill it."

"I won't. I am not strong just now—I am very weary, as you may well imagine."

"Come—come, put it down."

"But—"

"Put it down, I say. I tell you man, that I can get no more of it; and it is life to me. I want every drop of it myself."

"I should like just to taste it?"

"No—no."

"Nay, Sir Bernside, if, after all I have done for you, you won't give me one dose of your wonderful restorative, it is strange indeed!"

"But—but—well. You certainly have brought me the valise. Don't take much of it. You have certainly got me rid of Jonas Brand. Hold—hold!"

"It is pleasant."

"Very."

"I have not taken much."

"And yet enough?"

"Eh?"

"Enough, I say, to make you feel a new man soon, my dear Ambrose."

"Ah!"

"Why do you sigh?"

"Did I sigh?"

"Indeed you did."

"I was unconscious of it. Ah!"

"There, again!"

Ambrose pressed one hand over his eyes for a moment, and then he said:

"Does your wonderful syrup induce sleep?"

"Well—a—yes."

"Because—because—I—feel—. Is it late?"

"No."

"Yes. It is getting dark. Perhaps a storm—yes, a storm. I hear it raging. O God!"

"What is the matter?"

"What is this—what is this? All dark. What strange, rolling masses! Mountains come over me. Help—help!"

"Silence, fool!"

"Help!"

Sir Bernside made a wonderful effort, and flung his pillow at Ambrose.

"Ah! God—God! I feel it, know it now. I am—I am poisoned!"

"Of course you are. Ha, ha! Did you think, poor fool, to play at such edge-tools with me as half my fortune? Ha, ha! Goo!—good! Why, you are half dead—now your legs are dead!"

"Dead—dead?"

"Now your arm—now your heart!"

With a stifled groan, Ambrose fell on his face on the floor.

"Dead altogether," said Sir Bernside. "They will bring it in apoplexy! Ha, ha! The valise mine, and Jonas Brand dead, and Ambrose dead, and I fast recovering from my wounds! All will be right now; all mine—all mine! A drop of the diet-drink. I must keep myself cool, and nice, and comfortable."

Sir Bernside licked his lips after he had taken the drop of the diet-drink.

"A new flavor," he said—"a decidedly new flavor. Why, why—eh?"

Like some hideous spectre, Ambrose struggled from the floor. There was blood upon his lips—blood oozing out of his eyes—blood upon his hands. He uttered one awful yell, and clutched Sir Bernside by the beard and hair. His blood-stained lips were pressed into the very cavity of his ear as he yelled:

"The diet-drink is poisoned! Ha! ha!"

Then Sir Bernside screamed aloud.

There was a rush of people from the shop below.

Sir Bernside screamed again, and tried to shake off the dead body of Ambrose—for he was dead now; but he could not get the dead hands disentangled from his hair.

Despite his wound—despite all the rapidly-accumulating agony of the poison, he rolled out of the bed, still in the dead clutch of the jeweler.

Once more he screamed with awful vehemence, and then he rolled over on the floor.

The terrified workmen and shopmen flung the door of the chamber open. Timber emerged from beneath the bed, and set off at a wild pace for St. James' Square.

Both Sir Bernside Esperance and Mr. Ambrose, the jeweler, were dead; but they held each other in so firm a mutual clutch, that they could not be separated.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE LADY ADELA AND THE OWLET.

Breathless with the speed he had made, and in a state of great excitement, from the terrible scene of which he had been the only witness, at the jeweler's house on Ludgate Hill, poor Timber reached St. James' square.

To make but one wild rush into the hall, and to call aloud upon the name of Gerald were actions so at variance with the usual staid and orderly habits of Timber, that the Owlet, who was slowly descending the grand staircase, felt certain that something most extraordinary had happened.

Timber had been mentioned to him both by Gerald and by Alice, so that he had no difficulty in his recognition.

"Gerald! I want Gerald!" cried Timber. Oh dear! oh dear! that a fellow should see such things, and hear such things, and then be obliged to dream about 'em all his life."

Timber wrung his hands, and wept. The terrible deeds he had been a witness to had been too much for his sensitive organization, and it would be long before he would recover the even serenity of his mind.

"Come with me," said the Owlet, in his soft and gentle tones, "I will take you to Mr. Alton."

"Yes, sir—yes. To Gerald."

"Yes, to Gerald. Come."

Timber was trembling in every limb, but he followed the Owlet up the grand staircase of that stately mansion.

The Owlet took him through two rooms, and then tapped at the door of a third. A voice called out, "Come in!" and the Owlet opened the door, and taking Timber by the arm, he led him in, saying:

"I fancy, Gerald, that our young friend, here, has something more than commonly interesting to tell you."

"Ah, it is you, Timber."

"Yes, Mr. Gerald. They are both dead!"

"Dead? Who?"

"Mr. Ambrose and Sir Bernside Esperance."

"Ah!" said the Owlet. "Is it so? I am not surprised, however. Tell your tale, my boy, and be calm and cool, and speak low and gently."

The calm serenity of the Owlet seemed to have all the effect of a sedative upon the nervous system of Timber, who was able, with a tolerable degree of composure, to relate all that had happened at the jeweler's house.

"This is retribution," said Gerald.

"It is, indeed," added the Owlet. "So that episode is over, and Alice will have but little difficulty in the substantiation of her rights, but still you will keep to our agreement, Gerald, and wait yet for a short time."

"I will, in all things, do as you wish. And as for you, Timber, the house at Ludgate Hill is no place for you now."

"No—no. I—I will go back, then, to the workhouse."

Timber rested his head on his hand, and sobbed aloud.

"Treason!" said the Owlet, with a smile at Gerald. "Treason, is it not, to friendship and to feeling?"

"It is, indeed. Timber, my friend, do you think, for a moment, that I will let you go back to the workhouse? Are you not my dear friend? Will you desert me now, after being so kind to me? No, Timber, I am sure you will not. You will stay with me, and my

house will be your home, and my fortunes your fortunes, Timber."

The boy looked up. He was but a boy—almost a child, and the young heart had its own dictates. He flung his arms round Gerald's neck, and laid his head upon his breast.

"Dear—dear Gerald!"

The metal badge of the parish that was on Timber's coat, fell hard and harsh against the silken vest of Gerald Alton, but he returned Timber's caress for all that.

"I am glad of all this," said the Owlet. "A fair day to you both, and much happiness. I am now about to make a short journey, and shall not see you, Gerald, until sunset to-morrow. Farewell."

"Can I not be of some use to you? Shall I go with you, sir?"

"No—no! Farewell until to-morrow."

The Owlet again slowly descended the stairs, and reached the hall.

The great dog was there.

"Come, Drift," he said. "Come with me."

Drift made but one bound into the street, and they left the house together.

The Owlet then took his way to a stable in the neighborhood, and asked for his horse. In a few minutes, Leo was brought out to him.

Drift and Leo were old friends, and the huge mastiff gamboled round the horse, and barked furiously, while Leo, who knew well that all that was just in good fellowship and friendship, looked kindly at him.

The Owlet mounted and rode off.

The dog bounded after him.

No one knew where this singular man went for the remainder of that day, and for the succeeding night; but on Saturday morning he might have been seen slowly riding toward St. James' square.

The feet of Leo were covered with dust and sandy road particles, which seemed to indicate that he had been in the country.

Drift, too, was weary and dusty.

And so they reached St. James' square, and the Owlet entered the mansion he had made over to Gerald and Alice.

They were both in the large drawing-room, and they advanced eagerly to meet him.

"Ah," said Gerald, "you have come back to stay with us now."

"Only for one hour. But I have something to say to you both."

There was a certain mournfulness about the air and manner of the Owlet, which filled them with the most serious, although the most vague apprehensions. He felt certain that he was on the eve of some enterprise of more than common danger and importance.

"Ah, sir," said Gerald, "if you would only confide in me, and let me see if I could be of any service to you."

The Owlet shook his head.

"I will build up," he said, "if I can, but I will not pull down."

This speech was too enigmatical for Gerald to comprehend, and he looked as if he would fain have asked for an explanation.

"Forgive me," said the Owlet, "if I fill your minds with conjectures, I cannot at present be more explicit. But there is one thing that I should like you to do, Gerald."

"And I will do it, with pleasure, if it be for you."

"Come to the great gate of St. James' palace, to-night, at half past twelve, and there wait the course of events."

"The course of events?"

"Yes, you will hear from me, or of me."

"I will, sir."

"It is well. Take you, Alice, this packet; and if I am not with you, or you with me, to-morrow at midday, open it with your husband, and act upon its contents, for I shall be dead!"

"Dead? Oh, no—no!"

The Owlet smiled faintly for a moment, and then a bright flush of color came to his face, and fire seemed to flash from his eyes, as he added:

"Yes, dead, or something different—so different from anything that you dream of in respect to me, that you will scarcely ever cease to wonder at Fortune's strange caprices. Now farewell, and may the choicest blessings of Heaven fall upon you both!"

The Owlet turned to the door.

"One moment," said Alice. "You are my cousin, you know."

She held out her hand to him.

"Ay, truly you are our cousin!" he said; "so, specially, God bless you!"

He just touched her brow with his lips, and then with a smile and a wave of his hand to Gerald, he took his departure.

Tears forced themselves to the eyes of Alice as she said, mournfully:

"We shall never see him in life again. Oh! who and what is he? and what fearful adventure is he contemplating? There is a something that sits heavy at his heart."

"There is, indeed," said Gerald; "but I will obey him in all things: and I will be at the palace gate, not only at the time he has mentioned, but before it!"

"Do so, Gerald, and I will not rest until you come back to me, with news of him."

We now follow the Owlet.

Upon leaving the house in St. James' square, he went direct to the Irving stables, where Leo had been before put up, and left him there. Drift he left in the hall of the house, reclining on a mat.

And so the Owlet was alone. He then took his way to that obscure court, where once before we have watched him, and made his way into the house, where he had evident means of changing his apparel.

On this occasion, all he did was to put on his full dress as an ensign in the Guard; and when he emerged from the narrow court, he bore no appearance of fatigue, or of having been on a journey; and he sauntered down St. James' street toward the palace, in as easy and unconstrained a manner as any young subaltern of the Guard might do.

Close to the palace he met Ensign Hargrave.

"Ah, Harold! is that you?" said Hargrave. Why, where on earth have you been these two days, nearly?"

"On earth you may depend."

"Yes; but you have been missed!"

"No doubt of it. Folks like you and I, Hargrave, are sure to be missed. But how is Colonel Blanchard?"

"Much the same."

"Not worse?"

"Why, no. But he don't mend. That surgeon of ours says that he thinks there is something on his mind!"

"Indeed?"

"Yes. And so do I!"

"That's a pity, poor fellow!"

"It is; for a kinder, heartier man, and better officer does not live than Colonel Blanchard!"

"That is true, Hargrave; and I don't think your expression of such an opinion will do you any harm!"

"What do you mean?"

"Oh! nothing—nothing at present. I am going now, to see my cousin!"

"Poor fellow! you will be sure to find him at home."

"By-the-by," added the Owlet, "have you heard how Charles Beauchamp is?"

"Better—getting well, in fact."

"I am very—glad of that!" Are you on guard?"

"No. Ducie is until sunset."

"And then?"

"Then I go on until morning."

"Very good. I had leave, which expires to-morrow at mid-day."

The Owlet walked into the palace slowly, and Hargrave took his way up St. James' street. The sentinel saluted the Owlet, who touched his hat ceremoniously, and then he passed through the common guard-room, and was soon in the officers' guard-chamber.

The young ensign—almost a boy—Viscount Ducie, was there on duty.

"Halloa!" he cried; "is that you Harold Blanchard?"

"Yes, Ducie. How are you?"

"Oh! quite right, but dull—dull, you know. One must suffer, though, in this life!"

"Suffer?"

"Yes—yes! I was a king's page for eighteen months, and now I am an ensign in the Guard. If you don't call that suffering, I don't know what is!"

"You will survive it, Ducie."

"Yes, thanks to a strong constitution, I may. I suppose you are going to see your cousin, the colonel?"

"You are right, Ducie. By-the-by, you go off duty at sunset?"

"Yes, and Hargrave comes on."

"But if he should not?"

"Then I should have to stay; for there are so many of our fellows on leave."

"But I am here."

"Oh yes! But Hargrave will be sure to come. He never neglects duty!"

"To be sure—to be sure! But I wonder that the palace duty is left to the subalterns?"

"Why, you see, my dear fellow, the Grenadier Guards will relieve us soon, and so no change has been made. The lieutenant-colonel is forced to be here to take orders from the king. Well then, you see, the captains of the two companies who are on duty here go off, for they know they are not wanted, and the subs have to do the duty."

"Ah! just so!—just so!"

The Owlet opened the door of communication with the rooms in the occupation of Colonel Blanchard, and passed on to his bedroom.

The colonel was half-asleep, and moaning. An old woman was dozing by the bedside.

The Owlet touched her on the shoulder, and she started awake.

"Yes, sir. Yes!" she said. "More trouble!"

"Hush!"

"Oh dear, sir! I was not asleep. Indeed I was not, I assure you!"

"If you were, it don't matter."

"Dear me, sir, a body do get fagged."

"I am the colonel's, cousin—Mr. Harold Blanchard."

"Yes, sir, if you please."

"To-night I will sit up with him, which will give you a rest."

"You are very good, sir. I'm a poor lone body, sir, and—"

"Hush! If he should know of it, he will be sure to object, because he will think it may take me off my duty to-morrow. You see I am an officer."

"Yes, sir, I see you are a *hosifer*."

"So you will say not a word about it to the colonel; and at eleven o'clock I will come here and relieve you, and you can go home till morning then; and here is a guinea."

"Oh! sir, I will say it, perhaps, as should not, but you are the completest and handsomest young gentleman as ever I seed."

"Hush!—not a word! Well, colonel, how are you now?"

At the sound of the Owlet's voice, addressed thus to him, Colonel Blanchard slowly opened his eyes.

"It is you?" he said.

"Yes—Harold!"

"Ah!"

"How are you, colonel?"

"I don't recover. I am full of wild fever. I think I am dying!"

"Oh, no—no! I will promise you, in the most prophetic manner in the world, that you will be much better by to-morrow at noon!"

"Why? Why?"

"I cannot tell you why, but it will be so."

"What a funny gentleman he is," said the nurse.

"Nurse," said the colonel.

"Sir, to you."

"I want to speak to my—my cousin. You can come back in half an hour."

The nurse left the room, and was soon in the soldiers' guard-room, stating what a real gentleman young Mr. Harold Blanchard "were."

"Harold," said the colonel, with a look of great anxiety, "I shall never get well."

"You will, indeed, colonel."

"No, no. I do not think that the wound would have killed me; but you see, lying here all alone—for I am practically all alone—my mind goes back upon itself. Life has stood still with me since the duel, and I am a creature of the past. I have always before me the face of Captain Beauchamp, with its dying look."

"Come, come, colonel, you let your imagination play you tricks. What if Captain Beauchamp did fall by your sword? What then? You did not mean to kill him."

"But I did kill him."

There was such a look of anguish upon the face of Colonel Blanchard, that the Owlet was constrained to turn away his eyes.

"If I could but restore him to life again," he said, "I think I would give some few years of my own existence for his, if it would bring you back peace of mind. It was but a misadventure, after all."

"Yes; if I had had the moral courage to out-face it, and to say so at the time, as I ought to have done, then I might have got over it."

"Be at peace. You shall still get over it."

"No, no. The body."

"Now, listen to me. I have had the body carefully taken away and buried; so that there is nothing to dread on that score."

"That is something; but yet, if the affair should come to the ears of the king, I am a ruined man."

The Owlet smiled.

"And if the king made you a major-general, and said that, upon a careful consideration of all the circumstances, he thought that, whatever there might be to disapprove of in your conduct, you had suffered more than enough for it?"

"Impossible!"

"Not so. Have patience yet awhile."

"That drink, Harold. In the blue jug."

"Do you drink this freely?"

"I should expire from thirst if I did not."

"Well, well. Keep up your spirits, now, colonel, and I will keep my word. By to-morrow at noon, you will be very much better than you are now; because something will happen that will relieve your mind of some portion of the burthen that weighs upon it."

"I will hope."

"Do so—do so. And now, good-day. I shall see you again soon, probably."

"Yes, Harold. Do you know I am glad to see you, now?"

"You are?"

"Yes. Almost as glad as if you were really akin to me. I no longer have the same sort of shuddering dread of you that I had."

"I am very glad to hear that. Believe me, that I am most desirous of being your friend; and now, good-bye for the present."

"Good-bye, Harold."

The Owlet was touched to the heart by this slight interview with Colonel Blanchard, and there was a look of great sadness on his face as he walked up St. James' street in search of Ensign Hargrave.

The ensign was at a tavern—clubs were not then in existence.

"My dear fellow," said the Owlet, "I have just seen Colonel Blanchard, and he says that my being off duty so long is apt to be prejudicial to me; so, if you would let me relieve Ducie to-night, I should be much obliged to you."

"With all my heart, Harold."

"Thank you! Thank you! All goes well," said the Owlet, to himself. "No one opposes me. The path seems to be smoothed before me. All is well—all is well."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE TWO KINGS.

The sun has set on that eventful Saturday—it has set in a blaze of crimson and gold, and the last faint beam from its dying glories has flitted away from the old red brick turrets of St James' palace.

The Owlet, with a smile on his lips, walks in his usual quiet way through the common guard-room, and gains the officer's guard-chamber.

Ensign Viscount Ducie is there.

The viscount is very weary—very tired of his own company, which is singularly uninteresting, and he is yawning, and smoking, and now and then using language that is decidedly beneath his patrician condition. But he is pleased to see the door open.

"Hargrave," he said, "is that you? By Jove, no! It is you, Blanchard, is it?"

"Yes, Ducie."

"Well, it's a shame!"

"What's a shame?"

"What? Why, Hargrave not coming here to relieve me."

"Well, I have arranged all that with him. He wants a rest, and I want duty; so here I am to relieve you."

"You are?"

"On honor!"

"Good-day! good-day!"

Ensign Viscount Ducie was off and away without another word.

The palace-clock struck seven.

The Owlet sat down and rested his head upon his hands. A whole hour passed away.

The palace-clock struck eight.

Another hour.

The Owlet looked up and counted the strokes of the clock. It was nine.

The room was profoundly dark.

The Owlet went to a silken pell-pull, which

he could only find by moving his hand along the wall for it, and summoned the sergeant of the guard.

"Lights, sergeant."

"Yes, your honor. We did not know your honor had come in."

"It matters not. Lights now."

"Yes, your honor."

The sergeant brought a pair of silver candlesticks with wax lights.

"This parcel is for your honor," he said, as he produced a paper parcel finely tied up and sealed.

"Yes. Leave it on the table."

"Yes, your honor."

"Who brought it?"

"A young woman, your honor."

"It is well. You can go; and you can take the night-duty till I send for you."

"Yes, your honor."

The sergeant left the room, and the Owlet listened until his footsteps were no longer heard.

"A young woman!" he said. "They call Annie a young woman, now; but they shall call her Your Royal Highness soon—if I live—if I live!"

The Owlet now passed two more hours in pacing the room to and fro.

It was eleven o'clock. The wind had risen, and was blowing in fierce gusts about the courts and turrets of the old palace.

"It is time," said the Owlet.

He opened the door that led to the colonel's apartments, and as he did so, he saw the old woman apparently waiting for him.

"You may go, now," he said.

"Thank you, sir! Thank you, sir! I'm sure I'm tired—I am, sir; and thanks to you for a night's rest."

"Go—go. Take the staircase to the left, and you will not have to pass through the guard-room."

"Yes, sir, if you please."

The old woman was gone.

The Owlet was alone in that suite of rooms in the palace. He went to the door of the officers' guard-room, and locked it.

"I must be secure from interruption in that direction," he said.

The Owlet then untied and unsealed the parcel that had been brought to him. It contained a court-suit, with a diamond royal star upon the breast of the coat. He rapidly exchanged his regimentals for this suit, and then throwing over him his military cloak, he went out of the officers' guard-room toward the colonel's bed-chamber.

He could hear the wind roaring and battling about the old chimney-tops and turrets—sometimes wailing like some one in mortal agony, and then dying off in sighs, only to come back again with sudden flapping bursts, like the dashing of mighty wings.

The colonel slept.

The Owlet stood by the side of the couch, and looked intently at him.

"No—no," he said. "He must have the narcotic. He might awaken at any inopportune moment; and it can do him no harm. I am assured of that."

The Owlet then took from his pocket a small bottle, and decanted its contents into the night-drink. He then touched the colonel lightly on the shoulder.

"Colonel—colonel?"

"Yes—O God!—yes."

"Hush! There is nothing amiss."

"What is it?"

"Nothing—nothing! You were asleep, and I have awakened you, perhaps, rather suddenly. That is all. I am on duty to-night, and have only come in to see how you are. Will you have some drink?"

"Oh! yes—yes."

The colonel drank deeply of the drugged potion.

"So you are on duty?" he said, faintly.

"Yes."

"What is the time?"

"Eleven o'clock."

"Ah! what is that I hear?"

"The wind raging about the palace. It is a boisterous night."

"Very—very. Good night, Harold. I don't understand, you see, what your objects are; but I don't think—I don't—that you are a bad man—no—no, not a bad man—not bad—"

The colonel was in a deep sleep.

"Rest in peace," said the Owlet. And he took off his cloak, and placed it on a chair.

It was a very startling and strange circumstance to Gerald Alton (who had taken up his station since eleven o'clock close to the gate of the palace) that at that hour there arrived a coach at the palace, from which alighted no less than six persons, two of whom were in full uniform, as general officers. The others were in court suits, and Gerald heard one say to another:

"Well, marquis, this will be a good deed on your part, in regard to the king, which should be forever remembered."

Then the person addressed as marquis said:

"I obey orders from Versailles."

The whole party then went into the palace.

In the course of the next ten minutes, the sentries were doubled at the gate, and Gerald heard one of the men say to the other:

"What have we all got ball-cartridges to-night for? Eh?"

A cold feeling of dread, of he knew not what, came over the heart of Gerald Alton.

But we return to the Owlet.

There was a night-lamp burning in the colonel's room, and this the Owlet now took in his left hand, and with his right he opened the closed door, within which he had made such important discoveries upon a former occasion. All was precisely as he had seen before, and he set down the light on a table near, and gently drew out the shelf, behind which he had found the piece of cloth with the indentation in it.

The Owlet ran his finger now along this piece of cloth. Again and again it sunk at one part. A rapid slit with a pen-knife soon disclosed that the hollow place was a keyhole.

"As I thought—as I thought," said the Owlet.

He had removed from a pocket in his regimentals a bunch of pick-locks, and now he set to work, silently and skillfully, to open the lock that corresponded with the key-hole behind the strip of cloth.

With a slight, grating noise, the lock turned. There was a creak, as if paint or damp had stuck the hinges close, and then, in obedience to the pressure of the Owlet's hand, the whole panel gently opened.

A dark void appeared beyond.

A slight exclamation came from the Owlet's lips. He had expected to find a room on the other side of the secret door; but there was no such thing. He stretched out his hands into the darkness; he touched a wall—a wall of panel within two feet of him. He stooped to feel if there was a floor; for he could not tell but he might be on the brink of some abyss.

Yes, there was a floor. He felt the dust of ages on it like soft snow or wool. When he looked at his hands, by the light, they were perfectly black.

Then he held the night-light close to the paneled door, and looked out. The space beyond was a narrow passage, along which one person only could pass.

"This is between two rooms," said the Owlet, so faintly that not even a weasel could have been disturbed by the sound.

Then, with the night-lamp in his hand, he slowly walked along the passage to the right.

But it seemed interminable.

The Owlet paused. He reflected for a few moments, and then crept back to the colonel's room. The wounded man slept soundly.

The Owlet then took a folded paper from his breast-pocket, and laid it on the table, and opened it. It was a plan of St. James' palace, with all suites of rooms set forth.

"Yes," he said, "I am right. The king's chamber must be next to these rooms, and its two windows, or three windows, must look into the Color Court."

He left the plan lying on the table, and once more took the night-light and went into the narrow passage. He moved the light up and down the wall—that is, the opposite wall or paneling to that which was at the back of the closet—and then suddenly he said:

"Found!"

There was a key-hole lying horizontally in the wall; and he set down the light on the dust-piled floor, and carefully used his pick-locks.

The instrument did its duty—a lock moved—a door slightly creaked, opening toward him. Then a faint ray of light came from some slight opening. The Owlet paused a moment, and pressed his hand upon his heart.

"Be still—be still!" he said.

Then he blew out the night-light. The ray of light from a long crevice was stronger. The Owlet stepped over two feet of flooring, and pushed a door. It opened noiselessly, and he bent eagerly forward.

He was in the chamber of the king—a room hung with green silk and gold tassels; a bed, with a canopy surmounted by a royal crown; tall candelabra, one wax-light in one of which was alight; some wine and fruit upon a marble table; a slight odor of perfumes; a deathlike stillness.

The Owlet stood like a statue, and his eyes took in all the sights. He could hear nothing in the room; but he could hear the beating of his own heart.

He stepped forward another pace.

His feet were now on a soft, thick carpet that effectually deadened all sound.

He made another step forward.

"I will not kill him," he said, faintly. "I cannot kill him. Unless he should resist—unless he should be dangerous; but he will be my prisoner. My prisoner—this false king—this usurper! This—"

The Owlet paused. He thought he heard a faint, slight noise, like the clatter of arms in the Color Court below.

"What is it? What is it? Oh, it is a friend. They are there. It is about their time. The lords of my council. They were to get there by the private door of my Lord Chamberlain's office. Yes—yes, they are there."

The clock of the palace struck twelve.

"It is time," said the Owlet.

He approached the bedside. The occupant was really completely covered over with ample clothing.

The Owlet laid his hand heavily upon the sleeper's shoulder—if sleeper he were.

"One word!—one cry! A movement even from your recumbent position in this bed, and you are a corpse!"

A slight exclamation came from the person in the bed.

The Owlet then sprang to the middle window of the three that looked into the Color Court; he tore down the blind; he flung the window open, and in a loud voice he cried out:

"Long live the king!"

A rush of night-wind came into the room, and blew out the single light in the candelabrum, but a torch flared up in the Color Court, and a loud voice said:

"Long live King Harold the Second!"

"Descend, your majesty," said another voice.

"The Guard is with us."

"Ah, that is you, marquis?"

"It is."

"Close the palace gate! The distance is nothing. I will leap down to you. George is petrified with fear. He will not stir."

"Long live the king!" cried several other voices.

A drum beat furiously.

"Where is the abbé?" cried the Owlet, as he with a leap cleared the window-sill, and alighted safely in the Color Court.

"Fly!—fly!" shouted a voice.

"Ah!"

"Treason!" said one.

There was a rush of feet. The Owlet stood alone for a moment.

"What is this?" he said. "What is all this? Friends! my lord—where are you all?"

A window was dashed up on the other side of the Color Court; that is to say, opposite to the window at which the Owlet had sprung out. There was a blaze of light at that window, and to his surprise the Owlet saw George the Third in person standing just within it.

"I am betrayed!" he said.

One glance around him showed him the state of affairs. To his right was the cloister, as it was called—a low range of arches; the glitter of military uniforms was there. The other three sides of the court were inclosed by walls, and windows, and closed doors.

"Betrayed! Betrayed!" he cried out, twice.

"Fire!" yelled George the Third.

There was a volley of musketry from the troops in the cloister.

The Owlet lay pierced by twenty bullets.

Then the French ambassador stepped up to the body and bowed to the king at the window, as he said:

"I congratulate your majesty upon being rid of so dangerous a traitor."

"What is it? Oh, tell me! tell me!" said Gerald Alton, to an officer who came out of the palace hurriedly.

"Only a man shot who wanted to assassinate the king."

Gerald felt that it was his friend, and he ran home to Alice with pale and ghastly looks.

The next day, the story was all through London of how a man had penetrated to the king's chamber, in which, as his attempt was known, one of the soldiers of the Guard had volunteered to sleep, and that the traitor had been shot in the Color Court. Gerald Alton went to see the body, and recognized his friend.

There was a precipitate flight from England that same night of thirteen noblemen, all Roman Catholics; but a man in the costume of an abbé was found lying dead beneath the cloisters of the palace. He had been killed by a bayonet thrust through the chest.

It was some days after these tragical events that Gerald opened the sealed packet left him by the Owlet. It contained some valuable jewels, and a conveyance to him of the house in St. James' square, and a recommendation that he would take care of the horse Leo and the dog Drift. It ended with these words:

"If you open this, I am dead, because, if I live, I shall ask it of you. Accept what I give you—it comes from the King of England. Be kind to Annie our sister. HAROLD REX."

Alice wept bitterly, and Annie joined her tears to those of Alice, and then it was Gerald who said:

"This is the work of Providence. He is happier now than if he sat upon the throne. He is at peace!"

[THE END.]

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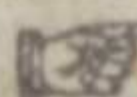
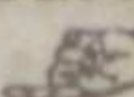
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